

THE INWARD MIRROR: GEORGE MEREDITH AND THE PSYCHE

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ABSTRACT

Courtney L. Vien: *The Inward Mirror: George Meredith and the Psyche*
(Under the direction of Allan Life)

One of the most intriguing aspects of George Meredith's work is his prescient, astonishingly realistic portrayal of the human psyche. Meredith anticipates the theories of Freud and the techniques of such modernists as Joyce, Lawrence, and Woolf in his depiction of the psyche as fluid, multilayered, and influenced by subconscious drives. This dissertation analyzes the presentation of the psyche in four of Meredith's major works: the novels *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Egoist*, and the neglected masterpiece *Diana of the Crossways*, and the sonnet sequence *Modern Love*. In these works, Meredith portrays not only his characters' thoughts and feelings but also their subconscious desires and fears, their attempts at self-aggrandization and self-delusion, and the archetypes and cultural scripts which inform their behavior. He argues for greater acceptance of emotion, sensation, intuition, and other non-rational aspects of the psyche, which he saw as devalued in an age which privileged science and technology. In his novels and poetry, Meredith also grapples with the philosophical implications of the decentered self, acknowledging that the instability of the self casts doubt on other traditional loci of truth, such as God and Nature. Ultimately, however, he suggests that, with sympathy, patience, and right reading, people can recognize a stable center of selfhood in one another, which he terms the soul. Finally, the dissertation explores the

ways in which Meredith's concept of the psyche inform his bold experiments with novelistic form and narrative voice.

DEDICATIONS

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband John, the love of my life.

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INTRODUCTION

THE NEGLECTED MASTER

“Ah! Meredith!” wrote Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*,

Who can define him? His style is chaos illuminated by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate. . . . [E]ven if the man’s fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses. (81)

These days, it seems, not many people are willing to brave the thorns to get at the roses.

Meredith receives precious little critical attention: in the past ten years there has been only one full-length study of his work published, and one biography.¹ He is not taught frequently, and his name is barely mentioned at the major conferences.² But Meredith, I believe, deserves better than such neglect, for reasons also beautifully articulated by Wilde:

His people not merely live, but they live in thought. One can see them from myriad points of view. They are suggestive. There is soul in them and around them. They are interpretative and symbolic. And he who made them, those wonderful quickly-moving figures, made them for his own pleasure, and has never asked the public what they wanted, has never cared to know what they wanted, has never allowed the public to dictate to him or influence him in any way, but has gone on intensifying his own personality, and producing his own individual work. . . . He is still the same. He is an incomparable novelist. (260)

¹Namely, Richard C. Stevenson’s *The Experimental Impulse in George Meredith’s Fiction* in 2004 and Mervyn Jones’s *The Amazing Victorian: A Life of George Meredith* in 1999.

²Since NAVSA was founded in 2002, for example, there appear have been only three papers on Meredith presented at its conferences, one in 2003 and two in 2008 (. (I have not been able to find data for 2005, though, as that conference’s website has been taken down.)

Meredith's best characters are astonishingly self-aware, thoughtful, and multilayered; the reader is made privy not only to their thoughts but their perceptions, their subconscious drives, their personal mythologies and archetypes, and their most cherished delusions about themselves. In his depiction of the human psyche Meredith would not be equaled until Joyce brought out *Ulysses* in 1922. In certain respects a modernist working without benefit of modernist techniques, Meredith was hampered by the conventions of the novel at his time, by an idiosyncratic style, and by a "philosophy" that sounds quaintly naïve after two world wars. Nevertheless, his psychological insight can rival that of any writer of the twentieth century. Freud thought him England's greatest novelist,³ and, after reading the likes of *Diana of the Crossways*, it is not difficult to see why.

In one of the great ironies of literary history, Meredith's reputation was savaged by the very generation of writers he helped inspire. His present unpopularity can partly be traced to the drubbing he received at the hands of the modernists, with whom the academy is still enamored. Partly because Meredith represented high Victorianism, Pound, Lawrence, Joyce, and Forster all disparaged him in print,⁴ and even Woolf, in her judicious essay on Meredith, had many harsh things to say. Above all, the modernists objected to Meredith's habit of inserting himself into his novels. Forster complained that

[h]is philosophy has not worn well. His heavy attacks on sentimentality—they bore the present generation, which pursues the same quarry but with neater instruments . . . And his visions of Nature—they do not endure like Hardy's, there is too much

³ Freud used a scene from *The Egoist* as an illustration in his famous essay on the Freudian slip, and references the obscure *The Tragic Comedians* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁴In 1918, just nine years after Meredith's death, Pound wrote that Meredith "is chiefly a stink" (qtd in Lucas page 1). Lawrence wrote disparagingly of *The Rainbow* that he hoped it would appeal to "the Meredith public" (qtd. in Beer 193). Joyce was dismayed to hear *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* likened to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, even though the two books share some important similarities. In a 1902 review of Walter Jerrold's *George Meredith*, he wrote that Meredith's novels had "no value as epical art" and that he considered them "philosophical essays" (qtd. in Beer 210).

Surrey about them, they are fluffy and lush. . . . What is really tragic and enduring in the scenery of England was hidden from him, and so what is really tragic in life. When he gets serious and noble-minded there is a strident overtone, a bullying that becomes distressing. . . . What with the faking, what with the preaching, which was never agreeable and is now said to be hollow, and what with the home counties posing as the universe, it is no wonder Meredith now lies in the trough. (89-90)

Woolf, likewise, found Meredith's "preaching" distasteful:

His teaching seems now too strident and too optimistic and shallow. It obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both. Above all, his teaching is too insistent. He cannot, even to hear the profoundest secret, suppress his own opinion. (qtd. in Adams 537-38)

Indeed, Meredith does not disappear into his novels in the manner that the modernists themselves championed. Even the best of his books are hardly seamless. Time and again, through a poorly chosen phrase or an overly elaborate bit of dialogue, he destroys the illusion that his characters came into being on their own, that they are not puppets controlled by a cautious and deliberate master. There is a self-consciousness that afflicts much of Meredith's prose, and an often fatal awareness of the limitations and unrealities of his medium. A certain reluctance is detectable in his writing: to commit to one fiction, he senses, is to stifle a thousand others *in utero*. And so he allows those myriad other fictions to elbow their way into his narratives, where they often confound and irritate the reader.

Getting through a Meredith novel, especially an early one like *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* or a late one like *Lord Ormond and His Aminta*, can be a frustrating experience for readers accustomed to smooth and univocal narrative voices. At times, it can seem as though Meredith is not in control of his material, or that he does not trust it, or is ashamed of it. He seems all too aware of his readers and at the same time unable to get a clear

image of them,⁵ and therefore, attempting to negotiate with them, keeps changing his stance toward his characters; here he is ironic, there romantic, there in deadly earnest.

And so he produces passages like the following, from *Richard Feverel*:

And the next moment the Bride is weeping as if she would dissolve to one of Dian's Virgin Fountains from the clasp of the Sun-God. She has nobly preserved the mask imposed by Comedies, till the curtain has fallen, and now she weeps, streams with tears. Have patience, O impetuous young man! It is your profession to be a Hero. (344)

Here Meredith, who, after all, has created Richard and Lucy and made them to elope, turns around and cruelly mocks them for their behavior, as if they had acted independently. Even while he does so, he calls attention to their fictional nature with terms like "Comedies" and "Hero." So what, exactly, is going on here? the reader is tempted to ask. Does Meredith not trust us to see that Richard and Lucy are, like many a teenager, naïve and somewhat foolish? Is he uncomfortable with the melodramatic turn his plot has taken? Does his bitterness stem from the fact that Richard acts much like the twenty-one-year-old George Meredith who proposed six times to Mary Ellen Nicolls? Or is this not Meredith at all but some snide and intrusive narrator, and, if so, how are we to respond to *him*? The plot begins to break down, *Tristram Shandy*-fashion, under the weight of so many possibilities.

Woolf shows great insight into this phenomenon when she writes,

the oddity is not on the surface . . . it lies deeper, in Meredith's intention, in what he wishes to bring to pass. He has been, it is plain, at great pains to destroy the conventional form of the novel. He makes no attempt to preserve the sober reality of Trollope and Jane Austen; he has destroyed all the usual staircases by which we have learnt to climb. And what is done so deliberately is done with a purpose. The defiance of the ordinary, these airs and graces, the formality of the dialogue with its Sirs and Madams are all there to create an atmosphere that is unlike that

⁵ Meredith's relationship to his perceived audience was an extraordinarily vexed one, and is a broad enough topic to warrant a study all on its own.

of daily life, to prepare the way for a new and original sense of the human scene. (qtd. in Adams 533)

She is, I believe, correct. There is a buzzing, manic energy about *Feverel* in particular, a sense that Meredith felt the conventions of the novel, circa 1859, to be constricting and inadequate to what he had to say. The book roils with interpolated genres—pastoral, lyric, Restoration comedy, chivalric romance—in a way that recalls, as Gillian Beer notes, nothing so much as *Ulysses* (193-4). In later novels, Meredith is less wildly multivocal, but the impulse to nudge beyond the boundaries of the novel still remains. It is telling that his most-praised novel, *The Egoist*, the one in which he adheres most strictly to an established literary form (the five-act comedy), is also the one which he called “a comedy with only half of me in it” (qtd in Cline I.297).

I am not completely convinced, though, that, in *Feverel* at least, Meredith was always “deliberate” in his invocation of different tones and genres. The novel seems too raw, too unpolished for this to be so. It gives the impression of being composed in a white heat, *à la minute*. One can almost track the movement of Meredith’s mind as he wrote it. This naked, unfiltered quality to his work, I believe, is what causes many readers to dislike Meredith. At the same time, though, Meredith’s self-consciousness and unwillingness to be bound to a single narrative drive one of the most powerful aspects of his work, and one with much relevance to today’s readers: his prescient, vital, and multifaceted exploration of the human psyche. It is this aspect of his work that I wish to call attention to with this dissertation.

The first reviewers of *Diana of the Crossways* were astonished at the illusion of a “living woman, dowered with exceptional gifts of ‘blood and brains’” (qtd. in Williams

263) that Meredith had created. Their surprise perhaps sprang from Meredith's representation of the various intermingling layers of Diana's psyche. Like other great Meredithian characters, such as Clara Middleton and Victor Radnor, Diana is animated by a maelstrom of competing forces. We are made privy not only to her conscious thoughts and impressions, but to the parts of her personality she attempts to hide or repress, and to the subconscious drives which sometimes compel her to act against her will. Diana is often a mystery to herself; she cannot say exactly why, for example, she chose to reveal Dacier's secret to Tonans, a seemingly irrational act which damaged Dacier's political reputation and caused him to reject her. But the reader, knowing Diana better than she does herself, is able to limn the subtle psychological forces underlying this action, and to see that Diana's adoption of the chaste-goddess archetype, and her hidden resentment of Dacier, lay behind it.

Meredith brings this proto-Freudian insight to many of his characters. The trauma of his first marriage, which I shall describe in greater detail in the chapters that follow, taught him that much of the psyche lies beyond one's conscious control. He recognizes and respects the power of the subconscious, holding it to be both a dangerous force that could not be ignored with impunity, and as a valuable lode of instinct. Meredith also believes his culture privileges reason and intellect at the expense of the non-rational parts of the psyche, such as emotion, sensation, intuition, and images and urges emerging from the subconscious. Throughout his oeuvre, he stresses the value of such "irrational" forces, which he often genders feminine, and depicts the deleterious effects of leading a life governed solely by reason. Those of his characters who adhere to science and believe

they can compartmentalize their psyches inevitably are made to suffer the psychological consequences.

For Meredith, the psyche is a nebulous, unstable entity existing in a constant state of flux. This condition can, if one is accepting of it, have many advantages: it leaves one open to experience and change, allows one to enjoy the present moment, and can make one flexible and resilient. However, Meredith was troubled by the philosophical implications of this view of the self. If there is no such quantity as a stable self, then many other aspects of existence, such as responsibility, promise-making, salvation and damnation, and meaning itself, come into question. In his early works, especially *Modern Love*, he grapples with this quandary. The speaker of *Modern Love* determines that the self is not stable, and is plunged into an ontological crisis in which he comes to doubt the existence of God, love, and universal truth. Only in retrospect does this speaker look back on his life and find some slender hope that meaning exists, but Meredith still holds out the possibility that this, too, may just be another fiction the speaker uses to comfort himself. Later in his career, however, Meredith did come to reconcile the unstable self with transcendent meaning, typically through the medium of Earth. In *Diana of the Crossways*, he does posit a stable center of selfhood, called the “soul,” that persists throughout one’s life, even while maintaining that parts of the self will always remain a mystery. Much of the power of Meredith’s characterizations, in fact, arises from this tension between the known and the unknown parts of the self: his characters are constantly discovering aspects of their selves they had been repressing, only to erect new defenses against parts of their selves that they are unable to deal with. This perpetual covering-and-uncovering, demolishing-and-rebuilding of the self is one of the most

modern tendencies of Meredith's work, and its influence can be seen in many later writers, particularly D. H. Lawrence.

Meredith was also very much interested in the presentation of self. He frequently employs metaphors of the stage and acting to describe the ways his characters conceal themselves not only from themselves, but from others. Some of his characters, like the speaker of *Modern Love*, become so "enamoured of an acting" that they come to doubt whether social intercourse is not all "acted," and whether it is even possible to present one's authentic self to others. On the whole, Meredith seems to believe that one can never *absolutely* know another person, though, in later novels, he suggests that it possible to sense another person's "soul" through long acquaintance with him or her and careful "reading" of his or her words and actions.

Meredith also reveals an almost postmodern preoccupation with the ways in which the self is culturally encoded. He constantly wrestles with the question of whether there is such an entity as an "authentic" self, or whether we do not merely piece ourselves together out of the personae our culture makes available to us. Often, his characters play out various cultural scripts, such as the Byronic hero, the martyr, the knight, the damsel in distress, or the chaste goddess, without even being aware that they are doing so.

Meredith comes to the conclusion that such scripts are unavoidable. Though it is impossible to escape their influence entirely, he surmises, what we can do is become aware of them and the ways in which they shape our personalities. In particular, Meredith vitiate against the pernicious effect some cultural scripts have on women. Too often, he argues, women adopt destructive scripts such as the "angel in the house" that limit their intellectual potential. What women need to do, he claims, is rework these scripts to better

fit their needs and those of the era in which they live; in doing so, they may even adopt masculine scripts, as Laetitia Dale does with the script of the orator and Diana Warwick does with the script of the knight. Meredith particularly criticizes the script of marriage, which can bind two incompatible and ever-changing people together for life. In *The Egoist* he makes a case for a new version of marriage, one based on mutual equality and a rigorous moral reckoning rather than on female submission and legal constraints. And in *Diana of the Crossways* he tantalizingly extends this version of “marriage” beyond gender, suggesting same-sex couples can participate in it as well.

Meredith’s vision of the psyche is reflected in many of his experiments with novelistic form and narrative presentation. Some of these experiments, such as his use of wildly varying narrative voice in *Richard Feverel* (a way of dramatizing the various cultural scripts at play in the psyche), strike most readers as clunky and confusing. Others, like the loose, organic structure of *Diana of the Crossways*, which follows its heroine’s psychic ebbs and flows, are far more successful. All of them, however, point to Meredith’s innovation and daring as he attempted to capture the quintessence of the human psyche.

A Note on Meredith’s Philosophy

Many critics use “philosophy” as a catchall term for a set of beliefs that form the background of Meredith’s major works. Though the term is something of a misnomer, as Meredith never systematized these beliefs, it has a long history in Meredith criticism.⁶ As

⁶G. M. Trevelyan first popularized the term in his still-seminal *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith*.

I use it as well throughout this dissertation, I will briefly summarize what is referred to as Meredith's philosophy.

Central to Meredith's beliefs is the concept of Earth (or Nature), a semidivine force he sees as animating plants, animals, nonliving aspects of nature such as the sky and sea, and all human life. Subordinate to God—whom Meredith thought of as a Creator but not a personal God—Earth, to borrow a phrase, is “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower”: she is what prompts plants to bud and flower, animals to mate and rear their young, and human beings to grow and prosper.⁷ Earth also bids people to live by the dictates of right reason: to be honest with themselves and others; to neither devalue nor overvalue themselves but recognize that they are mere members of the human race; to express their sexuality in an appropriate manner, by falling in love, marrying, and rearing the next generation. Meredith often links Earth, in a most Victorian fashion, to mental and physical health. His protagonists enjoy exercise, fresh air, contemplating the beauty of woods and mountains, and pleasures like food and drink taken in moderation—as did Meredith himself.

Moderation, too, is a key tenet of Meredith's philosophy. He locates three competing forces within the human psyche: “blood,” or physical and emotional drives (e.g., sex, love, hunger, anger); “brains,” or intellect; and “spirit,” or the desire to connect to something higher or larger than one's self, be it God, Nature, the human race, or a social or political cause. The three forces together are sometimes referred to as the “triad.” The ideal state of being, Meredith believes, is to have all three forces in balance. Problems arise when one represses one of the forces, or develops one at the expense of the others. To pursue intellectual goals (brain) while denying that one has a material body with its

⁷Earth is always feminine in Meredith's work, and often takes on a maternal aspect.

own valid demands (blood), for example, is to disrupt the balance, a state of affairs that leads, in a Meredith novel at least, to unhappiness, moral corruption, and worse.

It can be difficult, Meredith acknowledges, to listen to the promptings of Earth. One condition that prevents people from doing so is, of course, egoism; another is sentimentality, Meredith's term for viewing one's self in a romantic and self-aggrandizing manner.⁸ Both egoism and sentimentality occur when a person overestimates his importance, and feels that he is of more worth than other people, or that he is entitled to greater emotional extremes than most people. The cure for both conditions, Meredith believes, is the Comic Spirit: the ability to look at one's self and one's pretensions and be able to laugh at one's fatuousness. Laughter, for Meredith, is the great leveler. It is a gift of Earth that humbles the proud and brings them back into the fold of the human race.

After reading *The Origin of Species*, Meredith incorporated Darwin's theories into his belief system as well. Earth, he thought, was leading the human race towards greater perfection via the mechanism of evolution. To obey the promptings of Earth, then, is not only to ensure health and happiness in one's own life, but to do one's small part in helping humanity move forward. Earth, however, as a Darwinian principle, cares only for the race and not the individual. Only by contributing to the race can one achieve a limited kind of immortality.⁹

⁸Meredith's philosophy reveals where his allegiances lie in regard to his Romantic forbearers. For the concept of Earth he is very much indebted to Wordsworth. His attacks on sentimentality, however, are levied against histrionic displays of emotion in the manner of Shelley. Meredith also saw the Byronic hero as an especially pernicious and self-serving archetype.

⁹Meredith took a strange comfort from this belief. He had the following lines, appropriately, inscribed on his tombstone:

Our life is but a little holding, lent
To do a mighty labour. We are one

With heaven and the stars when it is spent
To serve God's aim. Else die we with the Sun. (qtd. in Stevenson 354)

CHAPTER 1

SCIENCE, GENDER, AND THE EXPOSED SELF IN *THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL*

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is a novel obsessed with secrets. Its characters keep secrets from one another and from themselves, probe one another in order to find out their secrets, use secrets against one another, and are torn apart by secrets they lock within themselves for far too long. Sir Austin Feverel tries to keep his son in a state of grace in which he can have no secrets; Richard in turn defies his father by conducting secret love affairs; and nearly all the women in the novel are emotionally damaged, sometimes irreparably, by the secrets they will not let themselves utter.

It comes as no surprise that Meredith's first full-length novel should be so concerned with secrets and the psychological havoc they can wreak. During its composition, he was suffering through consequences of his wife's adultery.¹ The popular success of Henry Wallis's *Death of Chatterton* (1856), engravings of which were widely available, added an embarrassingly public dimension to Mary's betrayal and, as Allon White theorizes, likely engendered in Meredith a lifelong anxiety about exposure.²

The impact of Meredith's failed marriage on *Richard Feverel* is evident even from a cursory overview of its plot, which I shall briefly summarize. Sir Austin Feverel, a

¹The novel was published by Chapman and Hall in late June, 1859, and Meredith claimed it took him a year to compose. The Merediths met Henry Wallis in around 1855 and Mary Meredith was romantically involved with him by summer 1857; late that same year, Meredith took lodgings away from her in Chelsea (Stevenson 58-60).

²White pgs. 35-42. Beer notes that the novel is replete with images of "being stripped naked and exposed" (8).

baronet, is cuckolded by his wife, who runs off with his best friend, the poetaster Diaper Sandoe. Deeply wounded, Sir Austin publishes a collection of misogynistic aphorisms entitled *The Pilgrim's Scrip* and retreats to his estate, Raynham, to raise his son, Richard, without female influence. He concocts an eccentric and pseudo-scientific program, called the System, by which Richard is to be raised. A major principle of the System is that Richard is to have no romantic or sexual contact with women until he is married, at the age of thirty, to a woman of Sir Austin's choosing.

Richard's upbringing is uneventful, save for a few midnight visits by a "ghost" who turns out to be Lady Feverel in disguise, until his fourteenth birthday. On that day, he and his friend Ripton are caught poaching by Blaize, a local farmer, who whips them. To retaliate, Richard hires a rustic named Tom Bakewell to set fire to Blaize's hay rick. Bakewell is caught, though, and threatened with transportation. Sir Austin overhears the boys talking about the fire and realizes they are to blame, but, instead of taking action, observes them for several days to see how Richard will handle this test. Richard's acerbic uncle, Adrian, torments the boys psychologically by hinting at what Bakewell and Blaize are suffering, and they respond with lying and cowardice. Richard's other uncle, Austin Wentworth, a good and honest man, tells Richard about Bakewell's courage in refusing to reveal Richard's involvement in the crime. Richard, guilt-stricken and newly aware of Bakewell's humanity, confesses his wrongdoing to Blaize and his father. The Feverels work behind the scenes to bribe a witness and get Bakewell out of jail, and the whole event is laughed off as the "Bakewell Comedy."

Things take a more serious turn when Richard defies the System by falling in love with Blaize's niece Lucy, a simple country girl. Sir Austin alienates his son by plotting to

have Lucy sent away, and by scouting London for a proper wife for the boy. Richard falls ill with brain fever and, when he recovers, believes that he no longer loves Lucy. He acts in perfect, though feigned, obedience to his father until he is allowed to take a trip to London with his uncle Hippias. In London, Richard encounters Lucy, who has been betrothed to her stolid cousin, and falls madly in love with her again. He and Ripton hide her in the house of the maternal Mrs. Berry, and Lucy and Richard secretly marry.

When Sir Austin hears of the clandestine marriage, he coldly cuts himself from his son and refuses to see the new bride. Even the entreaties of Lady Blandish, a widow who loves him, cannot convince him to see his son. As the months go by, Richard becomes demoralized and falls in with a wild set, spending less and less time with his wife. He occupies himself with a quixotic quest to save London prostitutes and even “rescues” his mother from Diaper Sandoe. Richard becomes emotionally involved with one courtesan, the alluring Bella Mount, and eventually she seduces him. Wracked with guilt, he flees to the Continent, where he harbors vague plans to join one of the 1848 revolutions.

Meanwhile, a wicked nobleman, Lord Mountfalcon, attempts unsuccessfully to seduce Lucy, who is pregnant with Richard’s child. After Lucy gives birth to a boy, Austin Wentworth brings her and the child to Raynham where Sir Austin, melted by the sight of his grandson and the goodness of Lucy, takes them in. Wentworth then goes to Europe, finds Richard, and tells him about his new son. During a thunderstorm on the Rhine, Richard has an epiphany: nature and the body call him back to his family. He reunites with them, but on that same night, stumbles across a letter revealing Mountfalcon’s attempt to seduce Lucy. Outraged, Richard challenges Mountfalcon to a duel.

The denouement of the novel is revealed after-the-fact in a letter from Lady Blandish to Wentworth. She states that Richard was gravely wounded during the duel and that Lucy, unable to bear the shock of having her husband taken away from her, fell ill with brain fever and died. Richard recovered from his wounds, but was so psychologically damaged by Lucy's death that he would never get over it. Lady Blandish swears off "Science" and ends her relationship with Sir Austin, whom she has come to see as a monster.

My analysis of the novel will center on secrets and their role in identity formation. In discussing this facet of the novel, I draw upon the work of Peter Faas, Sally Shuttleworth, and Rick Rylance and the observations they make about Victorian psychology. I focus first on the fascinating gender dynamics surrounding Sir Austin, whose "woman's heart" is the secret he must conceal, and who shapes himself to suit Lady Blandish's female gaze. I then turn to Sir Austin's surveillance of Richard, and the ways in which Richard's personality is warped by growing up under the constant gaze of his father. Then, I focus on the female characters in the novel and how their secrets—typically unexpressed emotions—bring them to madness and death. I delineate Meredith's extraordinary sympathy with Victorian women and the sacrifices they had to make to live up to a feminine role. Finally, I discuss Meredith's meta-commentary on the process of "reading" others and the self, and how this idea shapes the conclusion of the novel.

Midway through *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, at the turning point when Sir Austin bids farewell to Richard as the boy heads off for London, Meredith's narrator stops the action of the story to make a pronouncement:

At present, I am aware, an audience impatient for Blood and Glory scorns the stress I am putting on incidents so minute, a picture so little imposing. One will come to whom it will be given to see the elementary machinery at work: who, as it were, from some slight hint of the straws, will feel the winds of March when they do not blow. To them will nothing be trivial, seeing that they will have in their eyes the invisible conflict going on around us, whose features a nod, a smile, a laugh of ours perpetually changes. And they will perceive, moreover, that in real life all hangs together: the train is laid in the lifting of an eyebrow, that bursts upon the field of thousands. They will see the links of things as they pass, and wonder not, as foolish people now do, that this great matter came out of that small one. (280)

This passage has long been read as a manifesto of sorts on Meredith's part. Lionel Stevenson, for example, reads it as Meredith's discussion of "the novelty of his method" and as a "prophecy" of "an era of psychological acumen" (66), while Judith Wilt interprets it as instruction on how to read *Richard Feverel* and other Meredithian novels (114). And the passage does give rare insight into how Meredith wanted his audience to view his characters.

Most of Meredith's major characters have secret, interior selves which they hide from others through the donning of socially-approved roles. These hidden selves contain what we would today call the subconscious along with parts of the personality the characters are aware of but choose to keep to themselves. His characters vary in their degree of self-awareness: some are aware of the social roles they play and manipulate these roles with great adeptness, while others believe their outer and inner selves are in perfect congruence, until a personal crisis shocks them into the realization that this is not so. Oftentimes, as happens in *Diana of the Crossways* and *The Egoist*, a character's hidden self will assert itself in a time of great psychological upheaval, forcing that character to deal with parts of her psyche she had repressed and to re-evaluate her identity. The

hidden self, more often than not, is what motivates his characters' behavior, though they may not be aware of its influence and believe themselves to be acting "irrationally."

Given that people are so psychologically complex, and that they so often mask or dissimulate in their relations with others, it is crucial that people learn to interpret others' actions and motives. It is no longer enough to take what others say at face value; one must, instead, plumb their secrets with the powers of a scientist ("see the elementary machinery at work") or a diviner ("from some slight hint of the straws . . . feel the winds of March when they do not blow") to uncover what they keep hidden. People must learn to "read" others' physiognomies and patterns of behavior, and weigh this knowledge against their words, before knowing how to respond to them. Meredith puts forward psychologically-complex novels such as his as training for life in a society where everyone is not what he or she seems. He justifies his painstaking delineation of characters by stating that, by studying it, readers will learn to limn the "invisible conflict" going on all around them.

Meredith's view of the psyche as assumed roles covering a hidden self likely has its roots in Victorian psychological theory. As a friend and colleague of G. H. Lewes's, and as someone who moved among the leading intellectuals of his day, Meredith certainly would have been aware of such theories. Moreover, Meredith would have also had access to the writings of prominent psychologists via the journals he subscribed to, edited, and wrote for. As Faas, Shuttleworth, and Rylance point out, in the Victorian era, the work of leading alienists appeared in mainstream journals like *Blackwood's* and the

Edinburgh Review alongside literary reviews and serialized novels (Faas 13; Shuttleworth 51; Rylance 7-8).³

Psychological theories and jargon, in fact, are interwoven throughout *Richard Feverel*. Adrian Harley, to cite only one example, directly refers to the new, and unsettling, ideas about insanity that arose in the early decades of the nineteenth century. After catching Sir Austin spying on Richard late at night, Adrian deems him

“A monomaniac at large, watching over sane people in slumber!” . . . Where is the fortress that has not one weak gate? where the man who is sound at each particular angle? “Ay,” meditates the recumbent cynic, “more or less mad is not every mother’s son? Favorable circumstances; good air, good company, two or three good rules rigidly adhered to; keep the world out of Bedlam. But let the world fly into a passion, and is not Bedlam its safest abode? What seemed inviolable barriers are burst asunder in a trice: men, God’s likeness, are at one another’s throats, and the Angels may well be weeping. In youth, ‘tis love, or lust, makes the world mad: in age, ‘tis prejudice. . . . If we were not mad, we should fight [the battle between good and evil] ourselves, and end it. We are; and we make Life the disease, and Death the cure. . . .” And Adrian buried a sleepy smile in his pillow, and slept, knowing himself wise in a mad world. (64-5)

In this passage, Adrian echoes such theorists of the psyche as John Connolly, John Barlow, and Jean-Etienne Esquirol. Connolly, author of *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (1830), believed that madness was a temporary state that could be prevented if one exercised sufficient self-control. He wrote that “[I]t is only when the passion so impairs one or more faculties of the mind as to prevent the exercise of comparison, that the reason is overturned; and then the man is mad. He is mad only whilst this state lasts” (qtd. in Shuttleworth 35). John Barlow, in the tellingly titled *On*

³As Rylance writes, “the high-Victorian psychology of the years 1850-80 was a more open discourse, more spaciouly framed in its address to common issues, and with an audience crossing wide disciplinary interests. . . . The role played by the great generalist periodicals of the Victorian period is crucial in this, and the broad audience for psychology perceived the issues it raised as matters of common, not specialized, intellectual and cultural concern” (7). Faas similarly observes the blurred boundaries between specialists and non-specialists, noting that journals like the *Journal of Mental Science* and the *Asylum Journal of Mental Science* would publish psychological analyses of literary characters (like King Lear and the speaker of *Maud*) and reviews of literature that concentrated on the authors’ portrayals of the psyche (30-33).

Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity (1843), likewise declared that the only difference between sanity and madness was “the degree of self-control exercised” (qtd. in Shuttleworth 36). He defined sanity as the choosing of socially-acceptable impulses over unsuitable ones, asking his reader to

note for a short time the thoughts that pass through his mind, and the feelings that agitate him: and he will find that, were they all expressed and indulged, they would be as wild, and perhaps as frightful in their consequences as those of any madman. (qtd. in Shuttleworth 36)

Esquirol, similarly, asserted that in the madhouse

[one] finds . . . the same ideas, the same errors, the same passions, the same misfortunes, that elsewhere prevail. It is the same world; but its distinctive characters are more noticeable, its features more marked . . . because man there displays himself in all his nakedness; dissimulating not his thoughts, nor concealing his defects; lending not to his passions seductive charms, nor to his vices deceitful appearances. (qtd. in Shuttleworth 37)

These theories surmise that the difference between the sane and the mad is not one of kind but merely one of degree. Sanity, then, as Shuttleworth points out, necessarily partakes of conformity and insincerity. To be found sane, one must carefully regulate the expression of his emotions, displaying only those which society deems “normal” (37-9). Such an idea is highly unsettling, suggesting as it does that all people have the seeds of madness within them, and that sanity depends on one’s powers of repression and dissimulation. Sincerity becomes aligned with madness: untrammelled impulses are no longer considered the stuff of Romantic spontaneity, but as “wild,” “frightful,” antisocial promptings which must be kept down. Therefore, social intercourse by necessity becomes laced with masking and deception. People must hide their inmost thoughts and feelings even from those they love, leaving them in a condition of profound isolation. The self must necessarily remain a secret: as Shuttleworth writes, “the condition of selfhood is

dependent upon having something to conceal: it is the very *disjunction* between inner and outer form which creates the self” (38).

As unsettling as such ideas are, Meredith, throughout *Richard Feverel*, asserts that masking is an essential and even valuable part of the human condition. One chief way he does so is by setting up Adrian Harley as a foil to his “madder” but more human characters.

Adrian is able to accept current psychological theory with aplomb, given that he, almost alone among the novel’s characters, has no fear of exposure. As the narrator states,

Adrian made no pretenses. He did not solicit the favorable judgment of the world. Nature and he attempted no other concealment than the ordinary mask men wear. And yet the world would proclaim him moral, as well as wise . . . Adrian had a logical contempt for creatures who do things for mere show, as losing, he said, the core of enjoyment for the rind of respectability. The world might find itself in the wrong; it would find him the same. (32)

Adrian is able to be authentic, but only because he is both amoral and unchanging. He stands outside the flux of growth and development the other characters in the novel find themselves enmeshed in, and indeed watches their travails with the bemused eye of a spectator. Adrian treats life as a play performed by others for his amusement, intervening only (as when he parades Richard’s wedding cake around Raynham) when it can heighten his fun. Like the watcher in the center of the panopticon, Adrian is always the observer, never the observed; the gazes of others have no power over him, for he hides nothing.

The price of Adrian’s detachment is paid by the members of his family. Adrian stands idly by as Richard beats Benson, ensuring that the boy is never duly punished for his actions. He fails to bring about a reconciliation between Richard and Sir Austin, as he

was instructed to do, because he enjoys relaxing on the Isle of Wight and eating Lucy's cooking; in fact, he encourages Lucy to lie to Richard in order that he might prolong his stay. Most readers have found Adrian repugnant. Curtin finds him incapable of sympathy (275); Poston calls him an "arch-manipulator" (745). Wilt is nearly alone in finding him an attractive character whose wit and ironic bemusement the reader may be tempted to emulate (86-116).

Adrian's foil in the novel is Austin Wentworth, an idealized character who is likewise transparent in regards to his motives and actions. Wentworth has "so pure a face," the narrator claims, "that looking on it you seemed to see into his soul" (30). Tom Bakewell's mother describes him as a saint or a human touchstone of sorts: "the Lord know if the sight of him mayn't be the saving of you," she tells her son, "for he's light to look on, and a sermon to listen to, he is!" (76). It is Wentworth who resolves the Bakewell Comedy, notably counseling Richard to confess all:

"The coward chooses to think 'God does not see. I shall escape.' He who is not a coward, and has succumbed, knows that God has seen all, and it is not so hard a task for him to make his heart bare to the world. Worse, I should fancy it, to know myself an impostor when men praised me." (86)

Wentworth likewise is the one who, heedless of Lucy and Mrs. Berry's dithering, brings Sir Austin his grandson, and he also is first to tell Richard about his son, prompting the boy to listen to the promptings of Nature and return home.

However, Wentworth functions more as a plot device than a true character; as Beer says of a similar Meredithian hero, Vernon Whitford, "he is too integrated to be interesting" (79). Wentworth has to leave the story in order for the plot to develop. His directness and moral clarity can cut through the Feverels' obfuscation and ambivalence in a trice, and, had he stayed home to influence Richard, the boy likely never would have

come to such a bad end. Through Wentworth, Meredith exposes the dark irony of plot: misery, doubt, and psychological dysfunction give stories traction, while moral clarity and sincerity, however much we claim to value them, only can bring stories to their end. Or, to put it in theological terms, plots depend on sin and the attempt to conceal it. You cannot escape God's knowledge, Wentworth says (or that of his surrogate, the omniscient author), and, since He is your ultimate judge, there is no point in hiding anything you do. To conceal your sin is only to compound it. The other characters in the story, though, think of other people, and not God, as their judges, and, as people are fallible, attempt to deceive them. They either do not believe in God or choose to "forget" the fact of his existence as it suits them. In doing so, they make themselves interesting. It may be an indicator of our fallen state, Meredith suggests, that we need sin and deception to be present to find a story enjoyable; at the same time, he implies that this tendency of ours is deeply human. To live as Wentworth does, *sub specie aeternitatis*, requires extraordinary courage and goodness and an unswerving faith in divine justice. Most people, though, especially those living after God's existence is routinely questioned, are too flawed for the kind of perfection Wentworth embodies. They need to mask and cover their sins, and they must struggle to attain a Wentworthian clarity with themselves and others. Their plots arise from this struggle, whether they fail or succeed. Wentworth's presence in the novel, though, hints at the possibility of a comic ending extending beyond the tragedy of the final chapter. He acts as grace personified, helping his relatives achieve an honesty they cannot on their own.

The bulk of the characters in *Richard Feverel*, however, are more self-deluded and multi-layered than Wentworth. Chief among these is Sir Austin, Meredith's first

protracted study of a psychologically-complex, self-deceiving egoist. In Sir Austin can be traced the roots of such characters as Willoughby Patterne, Clara Middleton, Diana Warwick, Evan Harrington, and Victor Radnor, all of whom share the baronet's capacity for masking parts of their personality they deem unsavory. These later characters are even more complex and subtly-drawn than Sir Austin, but the baronet is a remarkable creation in his own right, and serves as a fitting starting point for a discussion of how Meredith viewed the psyche.

In Sir Austin, Meredith puts forth a proto-Freudian theory of repression and masking.⁴ The baronet, as the narrator states, possesses a "woman's heart" which he hides beneath an outer shell of scientific detachment. When Sir Austin refuses to receive Richard and Lucy, for example, Lady Blandish is mystified at his coldness. "[T]he Mask put [everyone] in the dark," the narrator informs us. "[Lady Blandish] saw through the mask sufficiently not to have any hope of his consenting to receive the couple at present: she was sure his equanimity was fictitious: but she pierced no further, or she might have started and asked herself: Is this the heart of a woman?" (422). The redoubtable Mrs. Berry, likewise, notes that

" . . . his 'art's as soft as a woman's, which I've cause to know. And that's it. That's why everybody's deceived by him, and I was. It's because he keeps his face, and makes ye think you're dealin' with a man of iron, and all the while there's a woman underneath. And a man that's like a woman he's the puzzle o' life! We can see through ourselves, my Lady [Blandish], and we can see through men, but one o' that sort—he's like somethin' out o' natur'. Then I say--hopin' be excused—what's to do is for to treat him *like* a woman, and not for to let him 'ave his own way—which he don't know himself, and is why nobody else do." (472-3)

Sir Austin is compelled to mask his feminine side because, deeply hurt by his wife's adultery, he has come to associate the feminine with chaos, disorder, and gross bodily,

⁴As Allen observes, his social mask "has the unexpected result of strengthening the very thing he would repress. His denial of the feminine . . . comes to define him" (87).

animal existence. In his aphorisms, he depicts women as a subaltern race, intrinsically inferior to men:

I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilized by Man. (2)

Woman when she wrestles for supremacy with every one she encounters, is but seeking her Master.

She's a Tyrant till she's reduced to bondage, and a rebel till she's well beaten. She worships strength, whether of the physic or of the intellect, and likes to feel it.

(5)

Reflecting on Richard's elopement, he associates womanhood with sin itself: "I cannot get that legend of the Serpent from me, the more I think. Has he not caught you⁵, and ranked you foremost in his legions? For see: till you were fashioned, the fruits hung immobile on the boughs" (457-8).⁶

Sir Austin comes to see the emotional, sentimental, nurturing side of his personality as "feminine" and resolves to "master" it.⁷ His sharply dichotomized view of his own psyche is revealed in an early passage in which a servant girl discovers him crying over his lost wife:

To express sympathy for a Feverel during his Ordeal was a grave misdemeanour: to surprise the Head of the family unmanned was a mortal offence. Dian was not more chastely jealous of her bath, than Sir Austin was of the moment when his knightly chainmail was removed and his heart stood bare. (20-21)

⁵Sir Austin is writing to Lady Blandish here.

⁶In certain ways, Meredith uses Sir Austin to critique his own behavior. After Mary Meredith returned to England following her elopement with Wallis, she begged Meredith to take her back and let her see their son, Arthur. Meredith refused, and only allowed her to see Arthur when he learned she was dying. He did not attend her funeral. For some time after Mary's elopement, he held misogynistic attitudes and hired a male nurse to care for Arthur as he could not stand to have a woman in the house (Stevenson 59-60). Beer points out that Meredith attributed some of his own aphorisms, written in the Maroon Notebook long before *Richard Feverel* was written, to Sir Austin, and that his own misogyny is reflected in the character (19-20, 24). Meredith may have written Sir Austin as a corrective to his own misogyny, and as a way of reflecting on his character flaws so that he could move beyond them.

⁷Several critics have noted the irony implicit in this desire: Holt, for example, notes that Sir Austin "is most irrational, most subservient to instinct, most romantically idealistic, even most sentimental, when he is most resolutely engaged in his icy systematizing" (134).

The narrator's use of the word "unmanned" here is telling. It is as though Sir Austin's masculinity is no more than an outer shell, underneath which he is feminine and virginal. Indeed, Meredith suggests that Sir Austin's devotion to "science" *is* just such a shell, less a discipline than a persona he adopts as a form of "knightly chainmail."

Sir Austin's attempts to expunge the feminine from his personality are strenuous, and come to affect his worldview profoundly. They lead him to conceive of man as a purely material being subject to mechanistic laws. "Do you," he enquires of Ripton Thompson's father,

. . . think . . . that you can trace every act of [your son's] to its motive? . . . Do you . . . establish yourself in a radiating centre of intuition—do you base your watchfulness on so thorough an acquaintance with his character—so perfect a knowledge of the instrument, that all its movements—even the eccentric ones—are anticipated by you, and provided for? . . .

Now I require not only that my son should obey, I would have him guiltless of the impulse to gainsay my wishes: feeling me in him stronger than his undeveloped nature, up to a certain period, where my responsibility ends and his commences. Man is a self-acting machine. He cannot cease to be a machine; but, though self-acting, he may lose the powers of self-guidance, and in a wrong course his very vitalities hurry him to perdition. Young, he is an organism ripening to the set mechanic diurnal round, and while so he needs all the Angels to hold watch over him that he grow straight, and healthy, and fit for what machinal duties he may have to perform . . . (161-3).

In conceiving of man of as a machine, Sir Austin again is much in line with certain real-world intellectuals of his day. As Shuttleworth points out,

Critics and apologists of industrialism alike proposed a . . . model of man as automaton, a model seemingly confirmed on the factory floor with its endless subdivision of manual tasks and the subordination of human labour to the requirements of machinery. (86)

Sir Austin, though no industrialist, finds the image of man-as-machine greatly appealing; Meredith certainly does not, and in fact critiques theories of automatism through Sir Austin. He does so on both moral and psychological grounds.

First, Meredith intimates, Sir Austin's theory is based on a drastic power imbalance. As Shuttleworth observes, theories of automatism often marginalized women, children, "savage" races, the working classes, and other groups. She quotes John Reid as an example:

the savage, the rustic, the mechanical drudge, and the infant whose faculties have not had time to unfold themselves, or which (to make use of physiological language) have not as yet been *secreted*, may, for the most part, be regarded as machines, regulated principally by physical agents(qtd. in Shuttleworth 87)

Sir Austin, similarly, has no problem with thinking of his immature son as an "instrument" or a mere "organism ripening to the set diurnal round," but he implicitly puts himself in the position of the "Angels" watching over the boy. He may claim all men are machines, but, in lived experience, he always claims the position of the master, the teacher, or the watchmaker God.⁸

Sir Austin's theories are likewise psychologically self-serving. In viewing Richard as an "instrument," Sir Austin may desoul the boy, but he also renders him far less threatening. If Richard is pure matter, in thrall to set physical and psychological laws, then he is completely knowable and therefore controllable. Any chaotic, emotion-driven tendencies he possesses can be trained out of him with proper management. By implication, the same goes for the rest of mankind. Everyone's actions can be "traced . . . back to [their] motives," and there is always a knowable cause for their behavior, no matter how "erratically" they may act. Sir Austin, as Buchen observes, "is a believer in perfectibility" (49).

⁸Wilt writes that Sir Austin has a "very personal and damnable intention, the temptation of all philosophers, to be the God of that systematized machine forever" (85); Horne, likewise, notes that he "narrows the boundaries of his existence, trying to shrink it to the point where he can assert over it a providential control" (37).

As Meredith suggests, though, the illogical, chthonic, subterranean forces of the psyche, gendered feminine by Sir Austin, can in no way so easily be dismissed. He illustrates this idea on the plot level by having women characters, expelled from Raynham by Sir Austin, return in spite of him. The servant girl who saw Sir Austin crying turns out to be Bessy Berry, who helps bring about Richard's clandestine marriage and who comes back to Raynham in triumph, with Lucy and Richard's baby in tow. Lady Feverel, likewise returns to Raynham as a "ghost," sneaking around its corridors at night so she can visit her son.⁹ These two women are associated with shame, but also love and maternal tenderness—qualities that, along with excessive emotion, Sir Austin attempted to constrain.¹⁰ That it is near impossible to quell such emotions entirely is demonstrated by how quickly Sir Austin crumbles when he is presented with his grandson, an innocent he is not yet able to place vis-à-vis his identity as the Scientific Humanist. At this point in the story, he is lonely and weary of maintaining his image: the narrator likens him to a "tremendous citadel . . . that only want[s] to be taken by force" (542). Artless Lucy and the baby, brought to him through Wentworth's intervention, in no way make claims upon his pride, and his buried tenderness comes to the surface. Seeing "the pain of [Lucy's] position shooting across her brows, and uttering gentle inquiries as to her health" (543), he insists she sit down; by the end of the chapter, Mrs. Berry notes that "He'[s] called her his daughter, promised her happiness, and given a father's kiss to her" (548).

⁹Fisher notes that Meredith's reduction of the Gothic, sensational aspects of his story to psychological events is perfectly in line with his principle of avoiding sentimentalism (286-9).

¹⁰Sir Austin finds it difficult even to show Richard physical affection: "To begin [demonstrating that pride did not rule him], he embraced his son: hard upon an Englishman at any time—doubly so to one so shamefaced at emotion in cold blood, as it were. It gave him a strange pleasure, nevertheless" (221).

This interval of openness is, sadly, all too short-lived. By the novel's close, Sir Austin has entrenched himself behind his armor of "scientific humanism" once more. In *Richard Feverel*, epiphanic moments of honesty are just that: moments, which the characters take few lasting lessons from. Pride and egoism are too powerful to be quelled for long.

This pessimism on Meredith's part—transmuted to hopeful comedy in his later novels—is best illustrated through the character of Richard. The young man almost serves as a case study of the baneful effects of repression. Indeed, in his careful study of how a psychologically-unhealthy upbringing can shape an individual, Meredith anticipates the work of twentieth-century psychologists. Observed, examined, and controlled from his earliest days, Richard learns to bury his antisocial impulses deeply—until, when he at last breaks away from his father, they burst forth in the form of a self-destructive romanticism. And, like Sir Austin, Richard holds a warped view of women and the feminine parts of his own psyche, developing a virgin-whore complex that prevents him from having healthy relationships with women.

The System is rooted in Sir Austin's morbid antipathy towards women, and its central, though unspoken, principle, is the elimination of the feminine from Richard's life and mind. This expunging of the feminine takes place on a very literal level: when Richard reaches puberty, Sir Austin discharges any servants who are in love, lest Richard follow their example, sets Benson spying on the female staff to keep them in line, and attempts to have Mrs. Doria send Clare away to school. His persecution of the feminine within Richard's psyche is even more thoroughgoing. Buchen, interestingly, likens him to a "grotesque psychoanalyst" (63). Like Wentworth's God, he wants his son's very thoughts and impulses to be transparent to him, and, when they are not, he invasively roots them

out. He requires a nightly “confession” of sorts from Richard: “The boy submitted to an hour’s examination every night before he sought his bed; professedly to give an account of his studies; but really to recapitulate his moral experiences of the day. He could do so, for he was pure” (130).

Sir Austin’s demand that Richard be perfectly open to him is, as Meredith suggests, proof both of his egoism and of his insecurity. In some ways, Sir Austin lives through Richard, wanting the boy to have the “perfect” life he was denied.¹¹ At times, he views Richard less as an individual with free will and autonomy than as a work of his creation for him to mold as he sees fit. He aligns Raynham, and by extension, himself, with purity and innocence: “The moment [Richard] breaks from me,” he states, “in a moment he is like the world, and claims Cousinship with an oath for his password” (38). Elsewhere, he declares, “But one thing [Richard] will owe to me: that at one period of his life he knew Paradise, and could read God’s handwriting on the earth! . . . my boy, if he fall, will fall from an actual region of purity. . . Whatever his darkness, he will have the guiding light of a memory behind him” (129). Sir Austin imagines a masculine Eden, free of any corrupting feminine influence, is attainable if only one has sufficient willpower.¹² Women, in his mind, are allied with original sin, and hence with mutability. But, in denying the value of mutability, Sir Austin cuts himself off from, in Horne’s words, “life in its variety, incompleteness, multitudinousness, in its randomness and unpredictability” (36). Buchen concurs, adding that Sir Austin denies the darker side of Nature—the pain,

¹¹Buchen writes that “Richard’s perfection and innocence will broadcast the father’s own goodness and innocence to the world. Sir Austin will appear in contrast to his wife as the embodiment of faithfulness, for he has married the System” (50). Horne, perhaps denying Richard sufficient culpability, likens him to an Iphigenia sacrificed upon the altar of the System (38).

¹²Allen likens Sir Austin to a “latter-day Victor Frankenstein” who “tries to create an edenic world where male bonds are unmediated and direct, a world in which the “creature” of his scientific system can flourish without maternal influence” (86).

death, and decay that are part of the cycle of life and are necessary if rebirth and growth are to occur (53-56).

Through Sir Austin, Meredith reveals why it is neither possible nor desirable to purge the feminine from one's psyche. Yet he also, with characteristic sympathy, hints at the psychological underpinnings of the System. Sir Austin may want to control his son so badly, he suggests, because he fears that, yet again, someone he loves will abandon him. When Sir Austin overhears Richard bragging about torching Farmer Blaize's rick, for example, he poignantly muses on loss and change:

the altered manner of his son impressed him strangely. He was not the boy of yesterday. To Sir Austin it seemed as if a gulf had suddenly opened between them. The boy had embarked, and was on the waters of life in his own vessel. . . . This child for whom he had prayed nightly in such a fervour and humbleness to God, the dangers were about him, the temptations thick on him, and the Devil on board piloting. If a day had done so much, what would years do? (68)

In some ways, Meredith intimates, Sir Austin's situation is that of any parent. Growing up always entails a fall from grace, but Sir Austin, like many a parent, wants to prevent his son from "falling" as long as he can. His mistake is that he cannot accept loss and change and thus let Richard commit the *felix culpa* that would enable the boy to gain self-knowledge.

Instead, Sir Austin oversees Richard far too closely, and the boy feels profoundly violated as a result. Richard's childhood is marked by repeated "exposures" of his body and psyche, all of which cause him to become distrustful of others and ever more protective of his inmost self. Even as a child Richard, like the original Adam, resists his father's request that he take off his clothes to be examined by a doctor; at fourteen, he likewise refuses to disrobe, claiming "I have been insulted . . . by my own father" (37) and taking off on the poaching expedition that culminates in the Bakewell Comedy.

A greater blow comes when Sir Austin discovers that Richard has been writing poetry, an activity he despises because Lady Feverel's lover had been a poet. Sir Austin has the boy and his poems examined by a phrenologist and a professor at Oxford, who reassure him that the boy has no talent and that he lacks the "imitative faculty" (131). Sir Austin nevertheless asks Richard to burn his poems, and the boy complies.

Richard's poetry is so disturbing to Sir Austin because it reveals that the boy has a secret, inner self he cannot access. Moreover, Richard's poetry is inextricably connected to his growing awareness of women and romance. Emily Allen suggests that "writing poetry," in this instance, can serve as a synecdoche for masturbation. She notes that Richard's physical "symptoms," "the blushes of the youth, his long vigils, his clinging to solitude, his abstraction, and his downcast, but not melancholy air" (129), "read like a profile of the nineteenth-century masturbator" (Allen 90). His poetry, she observes, serves him as an emotional and even physical release. The narrator describes Richard, for example, as caught up in feverish daydreams of chivalric romance, "in the act of consummating all earthly bliss by pressing his lips to [a lady's] small white hand," "leap[ing] from the couch, and rush[ing] to pen and paper to relieve his swarming sensations" (143).

Richard's poetry is clearly rooted in his sexuality. When this most private area of his psyche is pried into, he naturally takes it as a gross violation:

A strange man had been introduced to him, who traversed and bisected his skull with sagacious stiff fingers, and crushed his soul while, in an infallible voice, declaring him the animal he was, making him feel such an animal! Not only his blossoms withered, his being seemed to draw in its shoots and twigs. And when . . . his father, in his tenderest manner, stated that it would give him pleasure to see those same precocious, utterly valueless, scribblings among the cinders, the last

remaining mental blossoms spontaneously fell away.¹³ Richard's spirit stood bare. He protested not. (131)

Notably, it is Science, in the person of the phrenologist ("bisecting" Richard's "skull" with his "sagacious fingers") which crushes Richard's spirit. His poetry had been idealistic as well as amatory in character; the narrator describes it as arising out of a period of time when

the ripening blood has put a spark to the imagination, and the earth is seen through rosy mists of a thousand fresh-awakened nameless and aimless desires, panting for bliss, and taking it as it comes; making of any sight or sound, perforce of the enchantment they carry with them, a key to infinite, because innocent, pleasure. . . . The whole sweet system moves to music. (129)

Interestingly, the narrator uses the word "innocent" to describe the "pleasures" of this sexually-charged period of life. Sexuality, he implies, can be the driving force behind creativity and idealism. One Richard's poetry is "exposed," however, his idealism, for the moment, is shattered, and he regards his sexuality, now divested of the spiritual, as something low and animalistic. His pride becomes involved, and he comes to think of writing as a temptation he must not yield to, lest he be brought low again.

After being forbidden to write, Richard loses the emotional release that poetry provides. As a result, his emotions become dangerously bottled up. "Sir Austin had shut that safety-valve," the narrator notes, adding that "[t]he nonsense that was in the youth might have poured harmlessly out" (143) had he been allowed to write. When his emotions do come to the surface, they do so violently. The depth of his hidden rage towards his father, for example, is revealed in a scene when Richard catches Benson spying on him and Lucy. Furious, he picks up a tree branch and beats the butler, leaving

¹³The tree is an apt metaphor for Meredith's concept of the self in *Richard Feverel*: it has a tough but thin bark (the social mask) protecting a living core (the inward self). When healthy, it grows and produces beauty (flowers) and nourishment (fruit) for others.

“the stain of a tremendous blow across his nose, which made one of his eyes seem gone” (216). It is no coincidence that he strikes at Benson’s eyes, the organs which have exposed him and brought on his shame.

The “exposure” of Richard’s love for Lucy is a reiteration, and an amplification, of the discovery of his poems. Here again, Meredith reveals how scientific materialism, carelessly bandied about, can harm a vulnerable young person. Richard’s love for Lucy, while erotic, also partakes of an intense spirituality and romantic idealism. His father, however, attempts in proto-Darwinian fashion to convince him that his love is a mere animal function. “[Love] is a passion coming in the order of Nature, the ripe fruit of our animal being,” he asserts. “It is a name men and women are much in the habit of employing to sanctify their appetites” (225). Devastatingly, he implies that Richard is only going through a phase. He likens his son to a caricature, the besotted “Foolish Young Fellow,” who is “the object of general ridicule and covert contempt” (226). Much as Richard tries to close his ears to his father’s lecture, he comes away from it self-conscious about his romance, seeing it through the eyes of others for the first time. His love, he realizes, is not the unique experience of an ensouled individual, but one instance of the aggregate experience of a species. Much as he may try to shut out his father’s words, Richard can never go back to the Edenic, unselfconscious, in-the-moment romance he enjoyed with Lucy. From now on, there will always be an implied observer watching him and Lucy, even if the observer is only in his mind.

During the lecture, Richard resolutely holds onto his idealistic view of love, but, as Meredith indicates, it has profoundly affected him. Seen in its context, Richard’s headlong ride to find Lucy seems less a romantic gesture than an attempt to shut out his

father's words by reattaining Lucy's physical presence. The "blood fever" he succumbs to afterwards was perhaps precipitated by cognitive dissonance; when he recovers Richard feels as though "something had been knocked out of him" (262). He believes he has forgotten Lucy, and even burns a lock of her hair without blinking, but, as Meredith presciently reveals, he has merely repressed his love for her.

In more mature works, such as *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith envisioned the psyche as going through a series of "deaths" and "rebirths" over the course of a person's life. This "psychic biography," he came to believe, was as important as the outward events making up a person's life story. In *Richard Feverel*, he begins to develop this idea through Richard's period of repression and his spontaneous "recovery" from it. As happens in *Diana*, Richard experiences a severe blow to his self-concept, which causes him to fall ill and lose consciousness for several days. When he comes to, Richard finds himself in a numb state which, if not a psychic death, is certainly a psychic freezing.

"Nothing had changed," the narrator reports,

only a strong fist had knocked him down and stunned him, and he opened his eyes to a grey world. He had forgotten what he lived for. He was weak, and thin, and with a pale memory of things. . . . he knew [the landscape], but [it] seemed to have lost recollection of him. Nor could he find in familiar human faces the secret intimacy of heretofore. . . . What was lost he could not tell. . . . every sense of shame and reproach had strangely gone. He felt very useless. In place of the fiery love for one, he now bore about a cold charity to all. (262)

At this point, Richard, only part consciously, buries his feelings for Lucy. The narrator notes that "[s]till was fair Lucy the One woman to Richard. He had forbidden her name but from an instinct of self-defense" (288). As he did when his poetry was discovered, Richard bars himself from something he loves out of a need to protect his vulnerable self. He does so with such thoroughness that he even convinces himself that he has fallen out

of love. As he marvels to Ripton after reuniting with Lucy, “Well, when I recovered, I thought I did not care for her. It shows how we know ourselves!” (302).

Richard’s love, as Meredith shows, has not died but only been deeply buried. In a remarkable passage, he describes how Richard’s emotions rush to the surface upon seeing Lucy:

They say, that when the skill and care of men rescue a drowned wretch from extinction, and warm the flickering spirit into steady flame, such pain it is, the blood forcing its way along the dry channels, and the heavily-ticking nerves and the sullen heart—the struggle of Life and Death in him—grim Death relaxing his gripe: such pain it is, he cries out no thanks to them that pull him by inches from the depths of the dead River. And he who has thought a love extinct, and is surprised by the old fires, and the old tyranny, he rebels, and strives to fight clear of the cloud of forgotten sensations that settle on him; such pain it is, the old sweet music reviving through his frame, and the charm of his passion fixing him afresh. (287-88)

Here, with great acuity, Meredith describes the shock of recovery from psychic death, even down to the physiological sensations one would experience at such a time. The animal spirits and the emotions—the “blood,” in Meredithian terminology—cannot be quenched by Science, he intimates; block them for too long and they will only return with renewed vigor. Meredith also makes a claim for the intuitive power of Nature in this passage. The sheer sight of Lucy, who, as several critics have noted, is aligned with Nature, is enough to bring about this change in Richard. Nature, which works through sensation and intuition alone, and whose power cannot be explained through reason, is a force more than equal to Science. In this early novel, Meredith does equate the non-rational aspects of the psyche, perhaps too facilely, with women and children; however, he does make a cogent argument that the psychic forces of emotion, sensation, and vitality are as important, if not more so, than reason.

At the same time, Meredith adds yet another layer to this passage through its Petrarchan language. Love is “tyranny” and “fire,” a “charm” that transfixes one, and “old sweet music” all at the same time; it causes the lover both pleasure and agony. Even the structure of the passage resembles a sonnet, with its neat paralleling of the rescued man and the lover. Meredith, as Korg, Beer, Roberts, and others observe, interpolates the “voices” of several different genres into various passages of *Richard Feverel* (Korg 253-56; Beer 16-17; Roberts 25-30; Jeffers 124). Some examples include the Arthurian romance, the mock-epic, the boy’s adventure tale (Roberts 25), the love story, and the essays of Carlyle (25, 42-43).¹⁴ Segments of the *Pilgrim’s Scrip* also make their way into the narrative, as do passages which belong to the character zones of Adrian and Sir Austin (Roberts 17-25). Roberts surmises that Meredith uses these various styles to avoid the illusion of finality and authority created by using one monolithic, omniscient narrator. The interpolated genres, he writes, are “deprived of the ‘finalizing’ power that they would have in, for example, an actual boy’s adventure story, *Erziehungsroman* or love-idyll” (30). Korg takes this point further, arguing that the multiple styles of *Richard*

¹⁴ A few examples will suffice. This is the tone the narrator takes when Richard realizes he has lost his wedding ring:

Think ye a Hero one to be defeated in his first battle? Look at the clock! there are but seven minutes to the stroke of the celibate hours: the Veteran is surely lifting his two hands to deliver fire, and his shot will sunder them in twain so nearly united. All the Jewellers of London speeding down with sacks full of the Nuptial Circlet cannot save them! (344)

The description of Richard and Lucy’s first meeting is far more glowing and tender:

Above green-flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reeds. Meadow-sweet hung from the banks thick with weed and training bramble, and there also hung a daughter of Earth. Her face was shaded by a broad straw-hat with a flexile brim that left her lips and chin in the sun, and sometimes nodding, sent forth a light of promising eyes. Across her shoulders, and behind flowed large loose curls, brown in shadow, almost golden where the ray touched them. (148)

Meredith’s narrator also frequently resorts to a gnomic tone:

Know you those wand-like touches of I know not what, before which our grosser being melts, and we, much as we hope to be in the Awakening, stand etherialized, trembling with new joy? They come but rarely; rarely even in Love, when we fondly think them Revelations. Mere Sensations they are, doubtless; and we rank for them no higher in the spiritual scale than so many translucent glorious *polypi* that quiver on the Celestial Shores, the hues of Heaven running through them. (240)

Feverel are evidence that it is a novel without a moral center. Meredith, he claims, uses the styles to parody and critique the “philosophies” held by such characters as Adrian, Sir Austin, and Mrs. Berry, and to prove that all systems of thought are limited and skewed by the personalities of the people who concoct them (260-67).¹⁵ Christopher Morris, taking this point further, states that, in *Richard Feverel*, “language inevitably dislocates man” (242) and that its characters are “enslaved” by “fictions” they adopt from literature and sources like science (252).

Other scholars have responded to this deconstructive line of criticism by arguing that there is, in fact, a moral center to *Richard Feverel*. Jeffers locates this center in Nature, pointing as evidence to the vital sexuality that, when left untrammelled, leads the characters to health and happiness, to Richard’s epiphany in the Rhine woodlands, and to the unironized love of nature Meredith expressed throughout his oeuvre (131-5, 140-1). Buchen concurs, noticing that Sir Austin does not want to accept the pain, death, and decay which are the necessary dark side of Nature (54-6). “The real in *Richard Feverel*,” Jeffers writes, “is manifest precisely in the flesh of Hippias’ stomach or Bella’s mount of Venus, the passions that join and divide parents and children, ‘the founts of the world’ that yearly send the *reverdie*, and the norms of social life that . . . require payment from those who break them” (129). Though he concedes the fact “that language cannot duplicate the real is one of the main lessons of the novel,” he believes that “[l]anguage can . . . sometimes, follow close in its wake” (129).

¹⁵“As the novel’s grave theorists carry on their experiments and debates,” Korg writes, “the styles mockingly dance attendance on them, mimicking their trust in words, rhetoric, book-learning, and fixed opinions. There is no single narrative voice, no single impression to be conveyed by it, no sense of a consistent world view or authorial personality. Instead, we encounter a procession of occasionally recurrent artificial styles staging a performance that anticipates Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (260). Smirlock agrees that the novel is intended as a warning to would-be “model-makers” (106-07), while Beer makes a similar point, but is less critical of the characters’ “fictions”; she claims that Meredith uses literary forms as “emblems, as possible but limited ways of looking at the world” (16).

I side with Jeffers and Buchen in seeing Nature as the moral center of the novel. The interpolated voices of *Richard Feverel* do serve to point out the limitations of various genres and philosophical systems, and to prove that reality is too large and multifarious for any one system to encompass. There are dimensions to experience, also, that Meredith regards as ineffable, that language can only approach. These dimensions, which include nature, the body, intuition, and deep emotion, are exactly those which Sir Austin, with his masculine, “scientific” worldview, wishes to deny. However, Meredith would assert, simply because these facets of existence cannot be easily controlled or described in language, does not mean they are not “real” or that they are not important.

Moreover, as I shall argue below, there is ample evidence in the novel to suggest Meredith did want his readers to take certain moral and psychological lessons from his novel. For instance, the interpolations also function on a psychological level by hinting at the cultural scripts which influence the characters’ behavior. Throughout the novel, Meredith critiques such scripts and the ways in which characters use them as masks or dodges, thereby limiting their range of behavior and emotional expression. The Petrarchan gestures in the passage above, for instance, are an indication of Richard’s overly romanticized view of love. After his reunion with Lucy, as I shall discuss in greater detail below, he will cast himself in the role of heroic lover. He will be unable to find happiness with a woman once he has “won” or “rescued” her; he must keep women at a distance to remain interested in them. His self-concept, too, will take on dimensions of the tragic. Though Richard himself most likely did not come up with the image of the drowning man who is rescued, he may very well view his situation and physiological sensations in a Romantic or Petrarchan light. The sensation of renewed love may cause

him, on some psychic level, to liken himself to the speaker of a Petrarchan sonnet. Meredith attempts to capture this psychic action, which may lie in Richard's preconscious or even subconscious, by subtly changing his narrator's diction, thereby causing the reader to sense the same cultural resonances that are influencing Richard. In a way, the reader, too, can enter Richard's psyche.

However, Meredith strongly criticizes Richard's devotion to certain cultural scripts. His unexamined romanticism and his poeticized view of love, Meredith intimates, lead him, ultimately, to destroy himself and his family.

Due to a toxic combination of his upbringing and his reading, Richard sees women as damsels in distress to be rescued.¹⁶ His description of how he convinced Lucy to elope with him is telling:

“There she was—not changed a bit!—looking lovelier than ever! And when she saw me, I knew in a minute that she must love me till death! . . . Though I was as sure she loved me and had been true as steel, as that I shall see her tonight, I spoke bitterly to her. And she bore it meekly—she looked like a saint. I told her there was but one hope of life for me—she must prove she was true, and as I give up all, so must she. I don't know what I said. . . . She tried to plead with me to wait—it was for my sake, I know. I pretended, like a miserable hypocrite, that she did not love me at all. I think I said shameful things. Oh what noble creatures women are! . . . Rip! she went down on her knees to me. I never dreamed of anything in life so lovely as she looked then. Her eyes were thrown up, bright with a crowd of tears—her dark brows bent together, like Pain and Beauty meeting in one: and her glorious golden hair swept off her shoulders as she hung forward to my hands. – Could I lose such a prize? . . . I thought of Dante's Madonna, Guido's Magdalen. – Is there sin in it? I see none. And if there is, it's all mine! I swear she's spotless of a thought of sin. I see her very soul! . . . To see her little chin straining up from her throat, as she knelt to me! – there was one curl that fell across her throat. . . .” [. . .] Richard had gone off in a muse at the picture. (303-04)

¹⁶Baker intriguingly likens this tendency of Richard's to Freud's description of “love for a prostitute” or the “prostitute complex” in *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*. Freud claims that men with this condition choose love-objects they see as sexually immoral, that they are animated by jealousy of other men, and that they are compelled to rescue the women they love (Baker 202-04).

Notable, here, are the performative aspects of Richard's rescue of Lucy. He casts himself as knight and Lucy as imperiled maiden, though, to do so, he must flatten his, and our, conception of Lucy considerably. Gone is the robust, winning country girl he met on the riverbank. Instead, he chooses to view her as a patient Griselda, kneeling submissively at his feet.¹⁷ He empties her out, transforming her into a still "picture" to "muse" over; with his painterly eye for details such as the single curl at her throat, he sounds almost like someone analyzing a medievalist painting. Richard also simplifies Lucy morally, rendering her "true as steel," saintlike, "spotless of any thought of sin." Her magnified "goodness," he believes, justifies his eloping with her (the narrator summarizes his position as "Conscience and Lucy went together") (331) and elevates his actions to epic stature. All this, Meredith points out, takes place with precious little regard for Lucy's feelings. The girl cries bitterly after being lodged at Mrs. Berry's, and asks to be taken home, but Richard makes her believe that, if she truly loved him, she would stay, and she relents.¹⁸

Richard's likening of Lucy to both a "Madonna" and a "Magdalen" is deeply revealing. He wants to idolize women in the manner of the chivalric romances he has read, but cannot fully disavow his father's conviction that women are sinful. As his casual mention of "Guido's Magdalen" suggests, he sees even good women, like Lucy, as spotted with sin. Having been taught to see sexuality as sinful, Richard feels he must purify women by "rescuing" them from their sin before he can relate to them. Even his

¹⁷Baker finds some sadistic elements in Richard's description of Lucy here, observing that "the more he abuses Lucy, the more angelic she appears" (206).

¹⁸Richard sounds like a budding Willoughby Patterne at this point: "You ask me to wait, when here you are given to me—when you have proved my faith—when we know we love as none have loved. Give me your eyes! Let them tell me I have your heart!" (309).

elopement with Lucy takes on the qualities of such a “rescue”: marriage to Tom Blaize, he believes, would stain and lower her, and he speaks of his father’s plot as a “fine scheme to disgrace and martyrize [her]” (309). After his marriage, Richard goes on to rescue, or attempt to rescue, London prostitutes, his cousin Clare (from a May-December marriage), Bella Mount, and his own mother (from her common-law marriage to Diaper Sandoe).

As the “rescue” of Lady Feverel suggests, Richard’s secret antagonist in all these heroic endeavors is his father. He rebels against Sir Austin openly when eloping with Lucy and covertly in all of his other rescues: by trying to get Clare to buck parental authority¹⁹; by “restoring” his banished mother to respectability; and by disavowing all of his father’s most deeply held principles, especially those regarding women and sexuality. As Allen observes, Sir Austin fears women because they represent mutability and a self in a constant state of flux. Bella Mount, a prostitute and an actress who changes personae as easily as she does her gowns, is thus the ultimate symbol of everything he hates (82). Even her name, which suggests the *mons veneris*, hints that she is Woman incarnate. By allowing her to seduce him, Richard achieves the dual “triumph” of sullyng his own flesh, which the System was designed to keep pure, and associating with his father’s greatest bogeyman.

But, as the conflict with his father is never resolved, none of these “rescues” satisfies Richard. Even the “rescue” of his mother is not the grand Oedipal culmination he may have wished for: Sir Austin never even reacts to the restoration of Lady Feverel, and

¹⁹“Will you refuse to marry this old man?” he demands of Clare, who only replies, “I must do as Mama wishes.” Richard, inadvertently likening her to a prostitute, cries out, “That one of my blood should be so debased! . . . Have you no will of your own?” (427).

shortly after she is “saved,” she drops out of the story altogether.²⁰ Richard, likewise, quickly loses interest in a woman after he has rescued her. He dichotomizes women as sinful creatures to be saved, and “spotless”—and plotless—idols. Sinful women at least allow for the possibility of action, but idols are static and therefore uninteresting. Sadly, Richard even becomes bored with Lucy shortly after marrying her. He disparagingly terms her “the little woman” to his revolutionary friends, and thinks, “that the life lying behind him was the life of a fool. What had he done in it? He had burnt a rick and got married! He associated the two facts of his existence. . . . Great Heavens! how ignoble a flash from the light of his aspirations made his marriage appear!” (474). This boredom and guilt, as much as his anxiety about his father, is what keeps him away from Lucy for months on end, and it is a factor in Lucy’s death from brain fever.

Meredith roundly critiques Richard for his irresponsible and egoistic romanticism, even while he recognizes the role Richard’s warped upbringing played in bringing such romanticism about.²¹ Richard has a horror of domesticity—the very stuff that will form the matter of much of Meredith’s later fiction. He sounds, in fact, like one of the readers whom the narrator accuses of being “impatient for Blood and Glory” (280) and who cannot find excitement and meaning in everyday life. A sentimentalist, Richard does not want to “incur the debtorship” for the things he has done, but forge on to the next thing instead. His belief that Fate controls his actions is also sharply in contrast to Meredith’s philosophy of personal responsibility and self-reliance.

²⁰Richard puts Lady Feverel up at Mrs. Berry’s, and visits her occasionally. After her rescue, she is only mentioned in passing, as on page 540, when Wentworth goes to pay her his respects.

²¹Roberts reads Richard’s destructive romanticism as a critique of the *Bildungsroman* genre on Meredith’s part: “the all-important development of the hero in the *Bildungsroman* entails a tendency to regard other characters, particularly women, as instrumental and disposable” (41), he writes, observing that Meredith is hardly blind to the “sacrifice” of such women and that he invites the reader to find it immoral (40-1).

In many ways, Richard's romanticism is as much an act as Sir Austin's masking of his "woman's heart," the key difference being that Richard is unaware that he is acting. Sir Austin is thoughtful enough to, at times, catch glimpses of the emotional side he hides; the narrator writes of his having to "juggle with himself" in order to preserve his social mask. His "woman's heart" is analogous to what, in later novels, Meredith will term the "soul": a core personality that remains relatively stable throughout one's life. Richard has no such core, as his repressive upbringing never gave him the chance to develop one. His personality is modeled on the chivalric romances he read growing up: these gave him an alternate way of relating to women and challenges in life besides the sterile System. But Meredith does suggest there is a layer of Richard's psyche which lies beneath his romantic exterior. This layer is the stratum of the "blood," Meredith's term for one's body and animal spirits. The "blood," in contrast to the "brains" and "spirit," is the part of the person which responds to Nature and its evolutionary promptings. Nature, in Meredith's conception, is a semidivine force which encourages the human race to better itself through natural selection. Richard's choice of Lucy, for example a healthy and blooming girl who bears him a child in short order, is perfectly in line with the dictates of Nature.

When Richard listens to the voice of Nature, all goes well with him. After his father forbids him to write poetry, for example, he "instinctively" takes up rowing, which, as the narrator observes, "is an excellent medical remedy for certain classes of fever" (144). It is on one of his rowing excursions that he meets Lucy, and, again listening to the wisdom of his body rather than his mind, instantly falls in love with this "daughter of Earth" (148). And, upon hearing that he is a father, he has the epiphany, during a Rhine thunderstorm,

that leads to his returning home to Lucy.²² His tragedy is that he pridefully chooses romanticism—in the form of a fatal, unnecessary duel—over his responsibility toward his wife and child.²³

Richard and Sir Austin may be *Richard Feverel*'s two most fully-developed psychological portraits, but the chief female characters of the novel also make for interesting psychological studies. Like Richard and Sir Austin, the women of *Richard Feverel* have portions of their psyches which they feel the need to hide or repress, and they too subscribe to various cultural scripts as a way of masking the less socially desirable parts of their personalities. In contrast to Sir Austin's "woman's heart," several of the women in the novel possess masculine characteristics. Bella Mount dresses as a man in order to titillate Richard, and she is the one who takes the lead in seducing him. Carola, the thirteen-year-old girl Sir Austin selects for Richard to marry when she turns sixteen, is a thorough tomboy who wishes she had been born a boy, asks to be called "Carl," and complains about having to ride her pony sidesaddle. Mrs. Doria, despite her contempt for her own sex²⁴, is a born manager who arranges the life of anyone weak-willed enough to serve as her "puppet."

Even the more conventionally feminine characters in the novel have some transgressive wishes. Farmer Blaize, for example, asks Lucy to play "that song about the

²²"A father!" Richard repeats to himself at this point in the story, "a child!" "And though he knew it not, he was striking the key-notes of Nature," the narrator states. "But he did know of a singular harmony that suddenly burst over his whole being" (554).

²³Richard speaks and thinks in a stagy, pseudo-archaic tone even at this late stage in the novel. "O God! what an Ordeal was this!" the narrator paraphrases, "that tomorrow he must face Death, perhaps die and be torn from his darling—his wife and his child; and that ere he went forth, ere he could dare to see his child and lean his head reproachfully on his young wife's breast—for the last time it might be—he must stab her to the heart, shatter the image she held of him" (582).

²⁴She remarks, without any apparent irony, that Clare is "but one of our sex, and therefore of no value to the world" (135).

Viffendeer—a female . . . who wears the—you guess what! and marches along with the French sojers: A pretty brazen bit o’ goods! I sh’d fancy” (92). Lucy evidently has played this song before, and perhaps identifies with its “brazen” heroine. Lady Blandish praises Richard’s beating of Benson and states, “I should have done it myself if I had been a man” (218). Even Clare, outwardly the dutiful daughter, writes in her diary of cross-dressing (admittedly in the service of love): “[Richard] says he is going to be a great General and go to the wars. If he does I shall dress myself as a boy and go after him, and he will not know me till I am wounded”²⁵ (531).

These “masculine,” or at least brave and active, impulses, Meredith suggests, could be of great service to these women if they were able to express them. Instead, he intimates, the women feel compelled to cover them by taking on culturally-sanctioned feminine roles. Too often, the roles they adopt lead them to become repressed, sentimental, self-destructive, and, in Meredithian terms, immoral. While Roberts observes, rightly, that Clare and Lucy are “sacrificed” to Richard’s idealism (41, 46), I would like to suggest that, though Richard bears some culpability for their deaths, Meredith does not absolve the women of responsibility for assuming the roles that they do, even while he sharply critiques the culture that fosters such role-playing.

Clare, for instance, becomes immured in the role of woman-as-victim. Perhaps the most pathetic of the female sacrifices in *Richard Feverel*, Clare is, significantly, linked to the “ghostly” Lady Feverel. Upon seeing Lady Feverel wandering the halls of Raynham at night, Clare faints and falls ill with brain fever. Perhaps it is the shock of self-recognition which fells her, for, like Lady Feverel, she loves Richard in secret and at a

²⁵This remark is chilling in light of Clare’s eventual fate: Richard indeed does not “know” her until she is dead.

distance, and can only express her love physically by stealth (“He did not know I went to his bed and kissed him while he was asleep,” she writes in her diary. “I moved away a bit of his hair that was over his eyes. I wanted to cut it. I have one piece.”) (531). Both women are associated with death; the influence of both reverberates long after they have left the scene; and both, most importantly, subscribe to a sentimental romanticism.

Clare’s life is a study in repression. She hides her love for Richard while following the role of dutiful daughter to the point of caricature, accepting even the middle-aged fiancé her mother foists upon her without complaint. Clare is the sacrifice *par excellence*, whose function is to be violated, sicken, and die. The narrator even hints that Mrs. Doria’s machinations constitute a form of psychological rape. Mrs. Doria sees Clare growing pale and listless, and decides she is suffering from green-sickness. As the narrator puts it, “she had fallen into habits of moping which might have the worse effect on her future life, as it had on her present health and appearance, and which a husband would cure” (426). Mrs. Doria promptly provides for her daughter’s sexual well-being as she had for the girl’s physical health: “Now that [Mrs. Doria] saw Clare wanted other than iron, it struck her that she must have a husband, and be made secure as a woman and a wife. . . . as she had forced the iron down Clare’s throat, so she forced the husband, and Clare gulped at the latter as she had at the former” (424). The husband, too—the “indistinguishable” John Todhunter, one of Mrs. Doria’s own former beaux—is less than sanguine about the marriage, but is powerless to resist Mrs. Doria’s machinations; as the narrator wryly says, “The rape of such [spineless] men is left to the practical animal” (424).

Clare has traditionally been viewed as, in the words of DeGraaf, “unidimensionally the victim” (86), but she does, I would like to suggest, possess her own form of perverse imagination. While Clare submits to be sacrificed, inwardly she is preparing the great creative acts of her life: her diary and the death which will lend it resonance. Shortly after Richard rebukes her for her marriage, Clare becomes ill and dies, and there are suggestions that her death is a suicide. Her mother and Richard pray for God to forgive her for some unnamed sin, and Richard says, indicating Clare’s body, “were I to go [to Lucy in my sinful state], I should do *this* to silence my self-contempt” (542). She also dies with a dramatic gesture: wearing Richard’s wedding ring as well as her own on her finger, and calling attention to the fact by asking that her left hand not be touched. Clare’s death, then, may be the “wound” which makes Richard “know her.” Indeed, she writes in the diary, “Perhaps when I am dead he will hear what I say” (542). The diary itself is a carefully-composed retelling of her life vis-à-vis Richard, which “beg[ins] and end[s] with his name” (541). Clare has made herself into the perfect heroine, devoted to her love until death. It is a great shame, Meredith intimates, that this natural actress or writer should squander her creative talents on death.

In some ways, Clare is a female double of Richard’s. While much attention is paid to Richard’s upbringing, the narrator notes that, “[Clare] was growing too, but nobody cared how she grew” (29), a glancing remark that serves as a reminder of the selective nature of narrative. Clare has a coming-of-age story of her own, even if it is relegated to the background and deemed of far less interest than Richard’s. She too is the product of a “System”: her mother’s preoccupation with marrying her off to Richard. An attractive, energetic widow, Mrs. Doria nonetheless remains devoted to her late husband in what

John Todhunter thinks of as a “perpetual lamentation and living suttee” (424).²⁶ Like a Sir Austin in a feminine key, Mrs. Doria transfers her own blocked energies towards the raising of her daughter, and appears to live vicariously through the girl. The narrator’s light mockery of her project belies the real pain she causes herself and Clare:

For this she had yielded the pleasures of town: for this she immured herself at Raynham: for this she endured a thousand follies, exactions, inconveniences, things abhorrent to her, and Heaven knows what forms of torture and self-denial, which are smilingly endured by that greatest of voluntary martyrs, a mother with a daughter to marry. (134)

The “voluntary martyr,” as Meredith shows, is an egoist of an especially pernicious sort. He (or she) can attempt to control other people in order to fulfill his own desires, and claim all the while that he is doing so for their benefit. Moreover, he may be unaware of the psychological sources of his need for control. Rather than search his own soul and look at himself in an objective light, he takes refuge in melodrama and posturing, or what Meredith broadly termed “sentimentality.”

Lucy has received far more critical attention than either Clare or Mrs. Doria. She has typically been seen as little more than an idealized personification of Nature, a character who serves as a locus of stable meaning and a foil to the follies and pretensions of the rest of the *dramatis personae*. Beer, for example, reads her as “the one character who . . . remain[s] unsatirised; an ideal being, gentle and strong” (14), while Jeffers and Richard Stevenson see her untimely death as indication that nature both gives and takes away (Jeffers 141; Stevenson 216-18). Allen is more critical of Meredith’s idealization of Lucy: “By translating her into a vision of the maternal sublime,” she writes, Meredith “attempts to reinstate the concept of natural womanhood, and thus the sustain the systems

²⁶In *The Egoist*, Meredith’s narrator uses the phrase “living suttee” to describe Willoughby’s egoistic belief that a widow should not remarry after her husband’s death.

which rely on the fiction of naturalized female identity” (83). Lucy’s death, she adds, “acts as a seal on [her essential] nature, arresting her at a moment of womanly perfection”(97). Roberts agrees that, at this point in his career, Meredith was not able to move past the convention of the “little woman” as heroine, but argues that Lucy is strong, sexual, and, occasionally, deceptive (38-9). These viewpoints do aptly describe many of the facets of Lucy’s character, but I posit that Meredith also wanted his readers to view Lucy as a woman harmed by her conformity to stereotypes of feminine behavior.

As Roberts notes, Lucy does possess qualities which are not visible on the surface. For one thing, she is adamant about keeping her word. She persuades Mrs. Berry to let her keep her ring after her wedding, for instance, even though Mrs. Berry asks for it back, for, as she says, she swore, “With *this* ring I thee wed.” In doing so, Lucy privileges her oath over sentiment—and also over Mrs. Berry’s feelings. Nevertheless, she impresses Mrs. Berry in the process:

Poor Berry surveyed her in abject wonder from the edge of her chair. Dignity and resolve were in the ductile form she had hitherto folded under her wing. In an hour the Heroine had risen to the measure of the Hero. Without being exactly aware what creature she was dealing with, Berry acknowledged to herself it was not one of the common run, and sighed, and submitted. (350)

Lucy, too, is sexual, devouring large breakfasts on her honeymoon (“[E]ating was the business of the hour, as I would have you to know it always will be where Cupid is in earnest,” says the narrator) (399), and revealing “colour . . . rich and deep on her face and neck and bosom half shown through the loose dressing-robe” (580) upon Richard’s return. She also is not immune to flattery, taking pride in Adrian’s suggestions that she “manage” her husband and glorying in the thought that she has “reformed” Lord Mountfalcon.

These tantalizing glimpses of strength and spirit in Lucy suggest that she is a more complex character than she first appears. Richard, devastatingly, is never aware of this other side to his wife's personality. Instead, he magnifies her goodness into angelic purity, and thus is able to dismiss her as the dull "little woman" of domesticity. Lucy, for the most part, also tries to fulfill the role of "dear home-Angel." How much she sacrifices to do so becomes apparent at her death. As Lady Blandish observes,

I noticed that though she did not seem to understand me, her bosom heaved, and she appeared to be trying to repress it, and choke something. I am sure now, from what I know of her character, that she—even in the approaches of delirium—was preventing herself from crying out. Her last hold of reason was a thought for Richard. . . . had she not so violently controlled her nature as she did, I believe that she might have been saved. (589)

Only when delirium takes over can Lucy speak out. Her rage at Sir Austin now comes to the surface: "He heard her while she was senseless call him cruel and harsh, and cry that she had suffered, and I saw then his mouth contract as if he had been touched" (590). The extent of her suffering at being separated from Richard is transmuted into a vision of fiery torment: "Her cries at one time were dreadfully loud. She screamed that she was 'drowning in fire,' and her husband would not come to save her" (590). Like Clare, Lucy can only find voice when she is dying. Her tragedy is as much a matter of what she left unspoken as of her physical death.

To unearth the rage, sexuality, love for power, and tendency towards self-deception that lie deep within us *before* they come to the surface in a devastating way, Meredith advises, is one thing we should strive for, and a major goal of his fiction is to assist his readers in doing so. One of the chief ways we can do so, he posits, is through the careful reading of ourselves and others. In this idea, Meredith may again be calling on

psychological theories of his day. As Shuttleworth notes, alienists of the nineteenth century wrote of themselves as *readers* of their patients' behavior and physiognomies, who deduced mental health or illness from outward signs. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she writes, referencing Foucault,

[a] new interiorized notion of selfhood arose and, concomitantly, new techniques of power designed to penetrate the inner secrets of this hidden domain. Psychiatry and phrenology emerged as sciences, dedicated to decoding the external signs of the body in order to reveal the concealed inner play of forces which constitute individual subjectivity. (3).

However, Shuttleworth continues, the experts reserved the privilege of "reading" others for themselves:

The language of the body was no longer deemed to be self-evident: knowledge was required to decipher its signs. Indeed, its opaque surface spoke only when properly interrogated by experts. . . . [T]he observer d[id] not simply read the inner secrets of the self, but function[ed] as an active agency to release an 'implicit structure' previously outside the subject's grasp. (39-40)

Novelists such as Dickens and the Brontës, she argues, worked in an analogous fashion, "t[aking] on the mantle of social authority [and] revealing the hidden pathways of social and psychological life" (15-16).

Meredith, taking things a step further, wants to train his audience to "read" others in order to better understand the workings of human nature. In the passage about "feeling the winds of March when they do not blow" (see pages 4-5), he writes that his ideal audience will be able deduce "the elementary machinery [of events] at work" from "the invisible conflict going on around us, whose features a nod, a smile, a laugh of ours perpetually changes" (280). The stakes of such reading are high: "the train is laid in the lifting of an eyebrow, that bursts upon the field of thousands" (280). To illustrate how

such a process of “reading” might take place, Meredith gives the reader an example through Lady Blandish.

As Wilt notes, Lady Blandish serves as a ficelle or double of the reader (86-87). Blandish takes Sir Austin as her text, and over the course of the novel, grows to become a “most civilized reader of a most complex man” (Wilt 102). Lady Blandish begins by regarding the baronet as a plaything, a somewhat silly and pompous man she can entertain herself by flirting with. Self-consciously, and half-ironically, she slips into the role of his flattering admirer. As the narrator tells us, “Her own Copy [of the Pilgrim’s Scrip] was bound in purple velvet, gilt-edged, as decorative ladies like to have holier books, and she carried it about with her, and quoted it” (124). She adopts a low view of her own sex, the better to accord with Sir Austin’s principles, and allows him to “improve” her by reading the poets he recommends.²⁷ Gradually, though, her admiration of the man becomes genuine, and she falls in love with him.

But Lady Blandish’s sentimental love affair, like almost all sentimentalities in Meredith’s work, has painful consequences. Sir Austin’s cold “scientist” role ossifies precisely because he wants to look good in Lady Blandish’s eyes.²⁸ Her dalliance thus has its place in Richard and Lucy’s tragedy, as it convinces Sir Austin he must preserve his mask by refusing to see his son. Blandish learns to read past Sir Austin’s mask, but only gradually:

²⁷ One of her letters to him serves as a good illustration: “I like to know of what you were thinking when you composed this or that saying—what *suggested* it. May not one be admitted to inspect the machinery of Wisdom? I feel curious to know how thoughts—*real* thoughts are born. Not that I hope to win the secret. Here is the beginning of one (but we poor women can never put together even two of the three ideas which you say go to form a thought): ‘When a wise man makes a false step, will he not go further than a fool?’” (236-7).

²⁸ Meredith, ever mindful of the feminine gaze in shaping male identity, speaks of Lady Blandish’s eyes as “sweet mirrors”—a metaphor he will return to, famously, in *The Egoist*.

Closely she scanned the mask. It was impenetrable. He could meet her eyes, and respond to the pressure of her hand, and smile, and not show what he felt. Nor did he deem it hypocritical to seek to maintain his elevation in her soft soul, by simulating supreme philosophy over offended love. . . .

She hoped it was because of her having been premature in pleading so earnestly, that she had failed to move him, and she accused herself more than the Baronet. But in acting as she had done, she had treated him as no common man, and she was compelled to perceive that his heart was at present hardly superior to the hearts of ordinary men, however composed his face might be, and apparently serene his wisdom. From that moment she grew critical of him, and began to study her Idol,--a process dangerous to Idols. (396-7)

She still remains convinced of Sir Austin's brilliance until the denouement of the novel, when the evil of the System is made manifest.²⁹

After experimenting with narrative voice throughout the novel, Meredith hands the denouement over to Lady Blandish. Critics differ on the appropriateness of Lady Blandish as the final narrator, their opinion of her usually depending on how tragic they find the ending and how they respond to the intrusion of interpolated voices into the main narrative in general. Korg, for example, reads the novel as a comment on the futility of language and theories to deal adequately with reality. He views the tragedy that closes the novel as a marker of the "harrowing incoherence" (255) of the book as whole, and believes that, by giving the last chapter to Lady Blandish, Meredith "deliberately turns away from the task of making sense of what is happening and gives us the hurried, summary account of a narrator who is, at least for the moment, unequal to it" (253). Beer, likewise, writes that Blandish "simply records and suffers" (14), but argues that the choice of Blandish as narrator is appropriate, for Meredith uses her to avoid "forc[ing]

²⁹ See page 572, for example:

"She felt her feminine intelligence swaying under him again. There must be greatness in a man who could thus speak of his own special and admirable aptitude. . . .

Lady Blandish was still inclined to submission, though decidedly insubordinate. She had once been fairly conquered . . . Nevertheless, Sir Austin had only to be successful, and this lady's allegiance was his forever. The trial was at hand.

home an unequivocal judgment” (15) at the end of the novel. Meredith, she claims, does not want the reader to learn any “clear lesson” from the conclusion but to be “balked of a hierarchy of blame, faced with the fact of loss” (15).

However, the fact that Lady Blandish is chosen as narrator of the final chapter does, I believe, invest the conclusion with a faint glimmer of hope. First, it is surely not without significance that she, with the exception of Clare, is the only female character who speaks without mediation in the novel. Her voice is an unexpected eruption of femininity in this male-dominated book: she speaks with the tenderness and compassion Sir Austin denied himself, and with the outrage Lucy suppressed for so long. True, the ending still remains bleak. Lady Blandish is not able to speak out until Lucy is dead and Richard mad, and perhaps, sadly, she needed these shocks to be able to find her voice. Still, she resembles the spectator Aristotle imagined, who was able to learn from tragedy.³⁰

Also, Lady Blandish is perhaps the only character in the novel who grows in understanding. As Wilt and Carolyn Holt note, she becomes something akin to the ideal reader Meredith outlines in the “winds of March” passage (Wilt 120 ; Holt 140).³¹ She becomes completely disillusioned about Sir Austin, and makes a passionate case for clarity and openness. “Oh! how sick I am of theories, and Systems, and the pretensions of men!,” she cries,

³⁰John Morris writes, curiously, that the novel *lacks* “the requisite tragic affirmation” (335) because no one learns from it.

³¹Holt writes that “[Lady Blandish’s] painful struggle past Sir Austin’s System toward a vision of her own, a vision that is not a different abstract formulation but a response to immediate and particular circumstances, suggests the movement of an artist through received literary styles toward the unique approach demanded by his subject matter” (140). “Artist” is perhaps taking it a step too far, but Blandish does indeed learn to distrust preset “systems” and respond to experience without pretension or preconceptions. Here, too, Meredith strikes a Wordsworthian note in his championing of unfiltered responses to powerful emotional experiences.

There was his son lying all but dead, and the man was still unconvinced of the folly he has been guilty of. I could hardly bear the sight of his composure. I shall hate the name of Science till the day I die. Give me nothing but commonplace unpretending people! (588)

Blandish is at long last able to see the System for what it is: “folly” and “pretension” and “mad self-deceit” (590). She is incensed when Sir Austin tries to sacrifice Lucy still further for the sake of his grandson, with whom he perhaps intends to attempt the System anew:

What do you suppose *his* alarm was fixed on? He absolutely said to me—but I have not patience to repeat his words. He thought her to blame for not *commanding* herself for the sake of her *maternal duties*. He had absolutely an idea of insisting that she should make an effort to suckle the child. (588)³²

Significantly, Lady Blandish takes on responsibility for her part in the tragedy: “I have the comfort of knowing that I did my share in helping to destroy [Lucy]” (589), she remarks with sorrowful bitterness. Her self-knowledge is won at great cost, and it can feel like cold comfort after the devastating conclusion of the novel. Meredith, at this point in his career, may have felt too close to his source material to end the book any other way. In later novels, his protagonists will go through a similar journey to Lady Blandish, but will do so in time to make positive changes in their lives, and experience the comic endings that are more characteristic of Meredith’s oeuvre.

³²Meredith was a great believer in breastfeeding, and counseled his wives to nurse their children.

CHAPTER 2

MODERN LOVE: THE THREE FACES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

At first glance, *Modern Love* appears to be an anomaly among Meredith's works. Its speaker suffers greatly, but what, if anything, he learns from his experience, is unclear. His egoism is never punished in the way Willoughby Patterne's is; neither does his sentimental posturing lead directly to tragedy, as it does for Richard Feverel. He cannot even take refuge in the evolutionary optimism Meredith propounds in his nature poetry: here, Nature is pure indifferent matter, earth and not Earth. Meredith, the Victorian sage, seems to have given us a story without a moral.

The narrator of *Modern Love* is a fragmented man in a fragmented cosmos. The poem finds him undergoing a profound spiritual crisis in which he questions his belief in God, the benevolence of Nature, the orderliness of the universe, the stability and authenticity of the self, and the ability of language to convey truth.¹ He combats the chaos around him by briefly adopting various moral and philosophical stances, among them faith in God, allegiance to the devil, Epicureanism, Darwinian materialism, a *carpe diem* pursuit of physical pleasure, and a proto-existentialist determination to shape his own life in defiance of meaninglessness.² None of these stances satisfies him for very long, and he

¹Schmidt discusses the ways the speaker loses his faith in language and the stability of memory, and consequently in the stable self (82-107). Lund traces metaphors of space and distance in the poem and how they relate to the speaker's feeling of alienation (377-82).

²Bernstein sees the speaker as testing various "ways of characterizing experience" (11) and claims that the poem asks whether there are "true fictions, true norms for experience" (11).

often takes on one in one sonnet only to decry it in the next.³ The speaker also assumes different personae which he has culled from literature: at times he sounds, or even acts, like Othello, Hamlet, Lear, Shelley, a Byronic hero, a Gothic villain, or the Satan of *Paradise Lost*.⁴ These personae, too, fail to give his life meaningful structure, and he abandons each one soon after he has taken it on.

The fragmented character of the speaker's psyche, coupled with the apparent lack of moral or message to the poem, has led some critics to regard it as a testament to the impossibility of finding truth. Cathy Comstock, for example, in a key article, reads the speaker's ontological crisis as Meredith's statement on the human condition. Meredith uses the speaker's various personae, she writes, to underscore the fact that the self is a culturally-created entity,⁵ and that all philosophical or moral stances one can take towards experience are necessarily partial (129-30, 134-9). Patterns of imagery, too, fail to give the sequence coherence, as the reader quickly discovers that images like the snake and the star relate only to the speaker's state of mind in any particular sonnet, and do not point to a larger frame of meaning (130-4). The speaker himself is exposed as a literary

³At the end of sonnet XII, for instance, the speaker, stung by memories of happier days, declares it would yet be cowardly to "drink oblivion of a day"; in sonnet XIII, though, he decides it is wise to follow Nature's counsel and live for the day, not getting too attached to anything.

⁴Mermin describes the various roles the speaker adopts and his psychological reasons for doing so: by hiding behind personae, she surmises, he can detach himself from his emotions, which frighten him (108-11). The husband's play-acting does, she argues, help him to attain self-knowledge, by allowing him to "test and dismiss possible selves" (110). Golden views the couple as deluded by a concept of love as romantic, illicit passion incompatible with marriage. This concept, she notes, is rooted in the courtly love tradition that Meredith ironizes in *Modern Love*. The couple take on dramatic "roles" to escape the monotony of their married life (268-72). Bernstein views the narrator's adoption of different roles as his process of searching for a true norm of meaning. Ultimately, she claims, he fails in that quest (11-17). For more on "acting" within the poem, see also Tucker 363-4.

⁵She states, "The implicates that selfhood, feeling, meaning, spring not from within—even from the "false within"—but rather from the cultural models that happen to be available, provides perhaps the most important obstacle to a quest for overarching meaning in *Modern Love*. . . . But elsewhere we meet with a thornier uncertainty: the awareness of the arbitrary basis of any narrative construction" (138).

construction in sonnets like XXV, in which the speaker describes the plot of a “French novel” about an adulterous love triangle (138-40). When the wife calls the novel “unnatural,” the husband replies, with what can be read as a wink to the reader, “Unnatural? My dear, these things are life: / And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse” (15-16). Comstock views sonnet XXV as a destabilizing *mise en abîme*: “the major difference between the French novel and *Modern Love* is not that the psychological realism of the latter is any less “unnatural”—generated, that is, from prefabricated literary codes rather from an accurate description of human nature—but that it is more camouflaged in its conventions” (139). Paul Schmidt, similarly, reads *Modern Love* as “a self-conscious deconstruction of traditional beliefs about love, time, language, and the self” (86). The speaker, he argues, lacking faith in the veracity of his memories and ability of language to honestly communicate truths, becomes unable to inscribe a coherent narrative of his experiences. Consequently, his sense of self becomes fragmented (82-100).⁶ Bernstein, likewise, writes that, in *Modern Love*, three storylines jockey for prominence within the narrator's psyche:

a wished-for fulfillment or reconciliation, a tragic plot spun by the passions, and a story, usually false, told by conventions—any conventions, those of society, courtly love, literary pastoral or French romance. With a plot serving so many masters, or with so many plots or roles, the self has no center here. (13)

She finds no stable center of meaning within the poem itself, arguing that, although Meredith eventually found “a field for vision and self-development” in nature, *Modern Love* offers no such consolation (15).

Though *Modern Love* is a stirring testament to what can happen to a man who loses faith in love, transcendent truth, and order in the universe, I believe the poem is not quite

⁶Schmidt, almost alone among critics of *Modern Love*, reads the poem as more or less straightforward autobiography, and considers the speaker an uncomplicated stand-in for Meredith.

as nihilistic as some critics have made it out to be. Against this background of personal and cosmic instability, I shall argue, Meredith does hold out a slender hope that love, art, and the possibility of personal growth give life, if not transcendent meaning, at least some significance. While doing so, he gives testament to the successive, ever-changing nature of the human psyche, providing readers with an insightful and forward-thinking portrayal of a conflicted man in a state of crisis. Meredith also uses *Modern Love* to come to terms with the failure of his own marriage, and, in doing so, begins to develop the rich psychology that will characterize his later works.

One feature of *Modern Love* that has attracted the most critical attention is the fact that the sequence has two speakers: the seemingly objective third-person speaker who narrates sonnets I, II, IV, V, XLIX, and L, and parts of VI, VIII, and IX, and the involved first-person speaker who narrates the remainder of the sonnets. Sometimes both speakers will have a “voice” in a single sonnet, as in VI and VIII. Since Willie Reader’s article “The Autobiographical Author as Fictional Character,” most critics have regarded the speaker and the husband as the same man, looking at his experience from two different perspectives.⁷ Reader believes that the poem is narrated by a speaker reflecting on his failed marriage, who then gets so caught up in his memories that he reverts to speaking in

⁷Among such critics are Bernstein (12), Golden (267), Regan (24), and Simpson (350). Critics with a more deconstructive bent, however, propose that, in using two narrators, Meredith is calling attention to the instability of the subject. Comstock, for example, writes that, in introducing the first-person speaker without warning in the third sonnet, Meredith deprives readers of the one narrative convention they have come to count on. He then brings in a recognizable “character,” only to underscore that this character, too, is a mere fictional device (134-5, 138-41). Houston reads *Modern Love* as a blending of the novel and the lyric poem, and sees the two narrators as devices Meredith uses to negotiate between these genres. “By deliberately exposing the boundaries between intense lyric emotion and distanced narrative,” she writes, “Meredith deconstructs Victorian notions of lyrics and biographical authenticity in the sonnet, while pursuing the kind of psychological investigation into character usually reserved for a novel or dramatic monologue” (113).

the first person, as though reliving his experience first-hand (131-9).⁸ In the last two sonnets, the speaker regains his composure and is able to look back on his experience with greater objectivity (139-42). Meredith's use of the third-person speaker, Reader surmises, provides an objective perspective against which the first-person narrator can be judged, and lends elegiac dignity to the final sonnets (140-2). The two speakers, he also notes, allow Meredith to make "a fictional device of the very process of using autobiographical materials," which "create[s] a tension between the fictional autobiographical speaker and his materials, a tension which parallels and reinforces the central dramatic movement of the poem" (133). Phillip Wilson refines this argument by reconstructing what he sees as the *ur*-narrative of the poem: the speaker, haunted by lingering feelings of guilt at his wife's death, revisits his marriage to determine to what degree he is to blame for his wife's suicide. The speaker adopts various postures as he recalls key moments in his marriage, using a range of different strategies to exculpate himself, but finally coming to the conclusion that "the wrong is mixed" (XLIII.14) (Wilson 152-65).⁹

If the two speakers are, as these critics have convincingly argued, the same man speaking at different periods in his life, then they shed interesting light on Meredith's view of the self. In *Modern Love*, I believe, Meredith used the two speakers to experiment with a theory about the self that he developed fully in later works, most

⁸Reader observes that there is "an underlying psychological coherence" (132) between the two narrators, that their voices and philosophical reflections are very similar, and that the third-person narrator's "omniscience" is in fact limited to knowledge of the husband's thoughts (132). Further evidence that the two narrators are the same person can be found in the imagery they both use: symbols like stars, swords, and the ocean function like archetypes for both of them, and they both invest the same symbols with great psychological importance.

⁹Wilson views the husband as a more upright character than most critics are wont to, asserting that, in changing personae, he "establishes his moral stature by rejecting meretricious exculpating points of view" (153), but taking seriously his claim, in sonnet 20, that "I take the hap / Of all my deeds" (XX.3-4).

notably in *Diana of the Crossways*.¹⁰ In certain of his mature novels, Meredith describes the self as successive or “seasonal” in nature. He follows his characters through several phases or seasons of their lives, phases that, in some cases, are so different from one another as to almost constitute two separate selves. In *Diana*, in fact, the heroine's movements from one phase to the next are so psychologically fraught that they are figured as psychic deaths and rebirths or deflowerings and repristinations. Meredith also did not write the self as teleological: though his characters change, they do not necessarily *develop*. They may enter one phase of their lives with more wisdom and self-knowledge than they possessed in the last, but rarely does Meredith seem to place them on a clear trajectory *towards* attaining that wisdom or self-knowledge. Instead, he creates the remarkable illusion that his characters are moving organically from one season of their lives to the next. They frequently overcome their delusions, pretensions, prejudices, sentimental attachments, and mental blind spots only to stumble over a whole new set of illusions and character flaws pertaining to their new stage in life. They do learn from their experiences, and often can be termed “better people” at the end of a novel than they can at the beginning, but they never quite feel “finished,” and, when one closes the book, one has the impression that they will live on, deceiving and then undeceiving themselves, meeting new obstacles, for the rest of their lives.

A brief example from *Diana* will serve to illustrate the successive selves theory. In this scene, Diana has just moved to London on her own, an event which causes her to reevaluate her sense of self:

This new, strange, solitary life, cut off from her adulatory society, both by the shock that made the abyss and by the utter foreignness, threw her in upon her

¹⁰I will discuss this idea at greater length in my chapter on *Diana*.

natural forces, recasting her, and thinning away her memory of her past days, excepting girlhood, into the remote. She lived with her girlhood as with a simple little sister. They were two in one, and she corrected the dreams of the younger, protected and counselled her very sagely, advising her to love Truth and look always to Reality for her refreshment. (138)

Here, Diana, feeling vulnerable, bolsters herself by conceiving of herself as a sophisticated woman who bravely faces “Truth” and “Reality.” She does so by recasting her past self as a naïve child, prone to delusion and in need of counsel. In this way she can chalk any unpleasantness she meets in her new life—such as the street harassment she is often subjected to—as “Reality,” and convince herself she is honest and courageous to put herself in its way. The reader, having followed Diana to this point, knows that she *is* brave to move to London, and that she *did* cleave to romantic illusions in her younger days, but that there is more to both stages of her life than that. Diana works hard, for example, to convince herself that independent life in the city suits her, while the reader sees that this, too, is something of a delusion: Diana thrives on the companionship of her close friends and loves to have them near her, and, subconsciously, she longs for romance. Neither is the girl Diana the ninny Diana the woman has painted her. Diana the girl was witty, charming, intelligent, and refreshingly open to experience. As Meredith intimates, we often tend to cannibalize our past selves in order to shore up our current ones. To get anything like a clear perspective on our past selves we must be scrupulously honest; even then, much of the people we once were will necessarily be lost to memory. The writer of a novel, or of a novelistic poem like *Modern Love*, however, has the luxury of presenting various phases of a character's self without the distortion the character himself might cause.

One way of reading the two speakers of *Modern Love* is as Meredith's way of allowing the reader to hear from more than one of the speaker's successive selves.

Meredith may be presenting two separate speakers, who happen to be the same man, rather than one speaker remembering events and suddenly switching over to the first person. The third-person speaker, or the man's present self, would thus narrate only the sonnets in which he speaks, as would the first-person speaker, or the man's past self.

Such an interpretation would correspond closely to Meredith's experiences while writing *Modern Love*. The breakdown of his first marriage was the great psychological and ontological crisis of his life, and did more to alter his view of himself than any other event. Meredith was an idealistic and hopeful young man at the time of his courtship and marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls. He was only nineteen when he met Mary; she was seven years older, a widow, the mother of a young girl, and the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. Meredith fell ardently in love with Mary and, if her daughter Edith can be believed, proposed to her six times before she accepted (Stevenson 23-6; Jones 50-1). The couple were often short of money, as Meredith had quit his law studies in 1849 in order to become a poet, and the little income they had came from poems and articles he managed to have published in various journals.¹¹ He turned down Peacock's offer of a job at East India House, probably because he felt it would interfere with his writing. Nevertheless, he published his first volume of verse, *Poems*, at his own expense in 1851 (Stevenson 27-9, 37; Jones 52-4, 66). Problems with money only added to Meredith and Mary's temperamental conflicts. Both proud, brilliant, high-strung individuals,¹² they fought frequently and bitterly; as Edith later said, "They sharpened their wits on each

¹¹Jones estimates the couple's income as only about £60 in 1851, and probably less than that in 1852 (66).

¹²Ellis, based on an interview with Edith, wrote, "Husband and wife were too much alike in temperament and character and gifts to find permanent happiness together . . . [b]oth were highly-strung, nervous, emotional, restless in mind and body. Both were hot in temper, satirical and violent in argument and dispute, quick to imagine offence. . . . Terrible scenes and quarrels took place" (qtd. in Jones 79).

other” (Stevenson 47).¹³ The marriage came to its disastrous conclusion when Mary became romantically involved with Henry Wallis in 1856 or 1857. She bore Wallis a son in April 1858, and finally eloped to Capri with him in the autumn of 1858, leaving Meredith embarrassed and enraged (Stevenson 58-9; Jones 802).¹⁴

Meredith, unsurprisingly, came to see the entire period of his marriage as a mistake engendered by his youthful inexperience and naïve idealism. In particular, he vented his wrath on *Poems*, which contained many poems inspired by his courtship of Mary. *Poems* had been regarded by reviewers as a pleasing, if uneven, first effort; Kingsley defended it against charges of “impurity” and “voluptuousness” in *Fraser’s*, stating, “Health and sweetness are two qualities which run through all these poems” (Stevenson 41).

Tennyson praised its standout lyric, “Love in the Valley,” claiming he wished he had written it and that he had gone around his house reciting it (Stevenson 39; Jones 59). Yet Meredith dismissed the volume as “my boy’s book” (Stevenson 100) and “rubbish” (qtd. in Cline I.136), and later in life he wished it could be destroyed (Cline I.xxxi).

Some of Meredith’s letters from the months in which he was writing *Modern Love*¹⁵ also provide evidence as to how he viewed his former self, and how he saw himself as having changed. Certain of these letters also contain references to images in or situations and lines from *Modern Love*, and give valuable insight into Meredith’s views on women, love, and marriage. The most pertinent are excerpted below. The first was written to

¹³Mary secretly nicknamed her husband “George the Fifth,” in reference to his arrogant manner, and “The Dyspeptic” (Stevenson 44).

¹⁴For an insightful take on “The Death of Chatterton” and how Meredith may have responded to being “cuckolded,” see Allon White’s *The Uses of Obscurity*.

¹⁵There are references to *Modern Love* in Meredith’s letters as early as July 1861. The poem was published in the volume *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* in April of 1862.

Frederick Maxse, one of Meredith's closest friends and the man to whom *Modern Love* was dedicated, on August 18, 1861. At the time, Maxse was in love with a woman named Cecelia Steele, whom he contemplated marrying, though his father was opposed to the match. Maxse was utterly infatuated with Steele—Meredith called it “delirium”¹⁶--and, doubtless, put Meredith in mind of his passion for Mary. Very likely, Maxse was the inspiration for the love-struck friend in sonnet XXI of *Modern Love*:

We three are on the cedar-shadowed lawn;
My friend being third. He who at love once laughed,
Is in the weak rib by a fatal shaft
Struck through, and tells his passion's bashful dawn
And radiant culmination, glorious crown.
When 'this' she said: went 'thus': most wondrous she.
Our eyes grow white, encountering: that we are three,
Forgetful; then together we look down.
But he demands our blessing; is convinced
That words of wedded lovers must bring good.
We question; if we dare! or if we should!
And pat him, with light laugh. We have not winced. (XXI, 1-12)¹⁷

The husband is tart, even mocking, towards his friend in this sonnet, but, in his letter to Maxse, Meredith more closely resembles Diana counseling her “simple little sister”:

You know I very earnestly wish to see you, a man made to understand and make happy any pure good woman, married to one. I don't think any son owes his parents more than the conscientious assurance that he has clearly thought over what he is about to do (in such a matter); seeing that men are the only possible judges in the case; and that the stake is all their own. . . . A boy can't, but a man must reason, in these cases. You may know your love from its power of persisting and bearing delay. Passion has not these powers. If your love of this person is true and not one of your fancies, it will soon light you clear enough. . . . And don't be hasty and think you are trusting your instinct by grasping suddenly at the golden apple. Can you bear poverty for her? Will she for you? Can she, even if she would? . . . The

¹⁶Meredith told Janet Ross in November of 1861 that “My friend Maxse, for whom I have an affection, is in love and confides his delirium to me. His passion is returned, so I am spared the first impetuosity of the tide. . . . The poor fellow hardly sleeps—at all—like Chaucer's Squire 'a lover and a lusty bachelor'” (I.112).

¹⁷ This and all subsequent quotations from Meredith's poetry are from *The Poems of George Meredith*, Phyllis B. Bartlett, ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

great difficulty is to be honest with ourselves. If there comes a doubt, the wave of passion overwhelms it.¹⁸ Try and listen to your doubt. See whether you feel, not what we call love, but tenderness for her. Satisfy yourself on this point. And then determine to wait. . . . You will have pains and aches—agonies to go through. They serve to strengthen you. God bless you, my dear Maxse! (I.115)¹⁹

Exceedingly different from this warm letter is a reply to another friend, W. C.

Bonaparte Wyse, written in January of 1862. The precise context of this letter is unknown, but it appears as though Wyse had taken the progressive side on the woman question:

As to the question of misogyny, why can't you see that I'm on no side but the laughing side? Your view is the heroic, if not the right one, for it's against the world's experience, and smacks entirely of chivalrous youth. . . . [ellipses Meredith's] Women, my dear fellow, can occasionally be fine creatures, if they fall into good hands. Physically they neighbour the vegetable, and morally the animal creation; and they are, therefore, chemically good for man, and to be away from them is bad for that strange being, who, because they serve his uses, calls them angels.

I respect many. I dislike none. I trust not to love one. For what if you do? Was there ever such a gambler's stake as that we fling for a woman in giving ourselves to her whom we know not, and haply shall not know when twenty years have run?²⁰ I do blame Nature for masking the bargain to us. The darlings ought all to be ticketed. Nevertheless, I envy your state of mind with regard to them immensely. I have seen infants fed with pap-spoons. They took all in faith, and they were nourished. If I thought myself superior, I who looked at them loftily, and drank more than was good for me that night, was I not an ass? (I.136)

In a different letter to Maxse, though, Meredith sounds bewildered and cautiously optimistic in regards to women and the hope for lasting love:

[Cecelia] is, I am sure, a very sweet person: but how *strong* she is, or can be made, my instinct does not fathom. I am so miserably constituted now that I can't love a woman if I do not feel her soul, and that there is force therein to wrestle with the facts of life (called the Angel of the Lord). But I envy those who are attracted by

¹⁸ The phrase “the wave of passion” recalls the “wave of the great waves of Destiny” in sonnet V of *Modern Love*, as well as the image of the sea, which is symbolic of passion throughout the poem.

¹⁹ This and all subsequent quotations from Meredith's letters are from *The Letters of George Meredith*, C. L. Cline, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

²⁰ This sentence clearly recalls the line “Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart” from sonnet XIX of *Modern Love*.

what is given to the eye;--yes, even those who have a special taste for woman flesh, and this or that particular little tit-bit—I envy them! It lasts not beyond an hour with me. [. . .]

Has she principle? has she any sense of responsibility? Has she courage? Enough that you love her. I believe that this plan of taking a woman on the faith of a mighty wish for her, is the best, and the safest way to find the jewel we are all in search of. As to love ‘revealing’ all the qualities in one great flash—do you believe it even in your present state? Still, of so fair and exquisite a person it is just to augur hopefully . . . (I.121)

This letter gives enticing hints of what may have gone wrong in Meredith’s marriage, and sheds light on certain elements of *Modern Love*. Meredith’s remark that he cannot love a woman lacking the “force” within her soul “to wrestle with the facts of life (called the Angel of the Lord)” is suggestive of sonnet X, which reads

Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not like hard life, of laws. In Love’s deep woods,
I dreamt of loyal Life:--the offence is there!
Love’s jealous woods about the sun are curled;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.—
My crime is, that the puppet of a dream,
I plotted to be worthy of the world.
Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince! (X, 1-16)

and of sonnet XXXIII, wherein the speaker describes a painting of an angel battling with Satan:

Looked [the angel] fierce,
Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
.....
Oh, Raphael! When men the Fiend do fight,
They conquer not upon such easy terms.
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms. (XXXIII, 3-4, 9-11)

These letters and poems paint a suggestive and complex portrait of the man Meredith was in 1861. Most striking, perhaps, are his views on women. This is clearly not the progressive, feminist Meredith who created such memorable heroines as Clara Middleton

and Diana Warwick. This Meredith sees women as mutable creatures whom one may not even know “when twenty years have run” (I.125). He places his anxieties about the instability of the self onto women, portraying them as mysterious beings who may metamorphose at any time, leaving their presumably stabler paramours feeling betrayed. A woman's exterior, he writes, gives few clues as to her present or future character; feminine beauty, in fact, can be a cheat, Nature's way of “masking” the chancy bargain of marriage to them.²¹ (Nevertheless, Meredith claims to “envy” those who allow a woman's beauty to sway them, an indication, perhaps, that he is growing weary of his suspicion of the sex, and would like to fall in love again, even at the cost of deluding himself. In this, Meredith resembles the husband in sonnet XXIX, who tries to force himself to spiritualize his mistress, without success, so that he can regain some of the ontological security of the days when he was in love with his wife.²² Meredith, however, recognizes that such an endeavor would be futile; there is also a hint of self-congratulation in his insistence that feminine beauty holds no charm for him.) Not only are women unknowable by men, they do not even know their own minds well enough to make decisions about who they will marry: men, Meredith writes, “are the only possible judges in the case [of marriage],” (I.115) and “the stake is all their own” (99). He regards marriage as a desperate gamble, in which a man ties himself for life to a being who unwittingly deludes him with outward charm, only to change her character without warning.²³

²¹Mary was beautiful, but Meredith's second wife, Marie, had a large jaw and was considered more average in looks.

²²“Am I failing? For no longer can I cast / A glory round about this head of gold. / Glory she wears, but springing from the mould; / Not like the consecration of the Past!” (XXIX, 1-4).

²³ An early draft of sonnet X read, in part:

But the letters also point to Meredith's own mutability. In his advice to Maxse and Wyse, he almost could be repudiating his former self: he counsels Maxse not to trust “passion,” and not to give way to romanticism by marrying in haste. Distrust “instinct” and emotion, he warns his friend; cleave to reason and patience instead. Such, he says, cuttingly, is the way of a “man,” and not a boy. Some slippage between Maxse and Meredith's younger self is also detectable in his questioning whether Cecelia would be able to bear poverty. Maxse, the scion of a wealthy and aristocratic family,²⁴ and a captain in the Royal Navy, was hardly likely to face poverty, but strained finances had been a major factor in the demise of the Merediths' marriage. Meredith likely was thinking more of his young self than of Maxse when he named the ability to bear poverty as a crucial trait in a woman one would marry.

In similar fashion, Meredith tells Wyse his opinion of women “smacks entirely of chivalrous youth” and likens it to that of a infant blindly swallowing “pap.” Meredith's bitterness suggests that Wyse struck him in a vulnerable place with his youthful enthusiasm: he appears to be trying to dissociate himself from the “boyhood” self that Wyse and Maxse caused him to recall. Once again, he writes of “envying” a man possessed of his old illusions about women, only here the verb is certainly meant

Contest not, we learn much from misery.
 I knew not women till I suffer'd thus:
 The things they are, and may be, unto us.
 She gives the key with her inconstancy.

 Narrow'd in that hot centre of their life
 Where instincts rule, they bind you to its laws,
 Those shifting sandbanks which the ebb-tide draws!--
 You have a one-month's bride, & then a wife
 Who weens that time deposes her; rebels (Bartlett 121)

Meredith probably rejected this sonnet due to its obviousness: the revised sonnet, and others, make the same points far more subtly.

²⁴Maxse's mother, Lady Caroline Fitzhardinge, was the daughter of an earl.

ironically. Meredith looks back upon his “boyhood” as an inferior state he is glad, morally speaking, to have left; there are, though, some aspects of this stage in life he misses, such as the unalloyed idealism and optimism he possessed towards love. In the final line of the letter, Meredith captures his bittersweet sensations aptly when he writes, “If I thought myself superior, I who looked at [the pap-fed infants] loftily, and drank more than was good for me that night, was I not an ass?” (125). In other words, Meredith does recognize that, as a young man, he could not help being naïve and idealistic, and that, now that he has moved on, he is not really “superior,” only different. He anticipates a day when he will look back on his present self and all its attendant anodynes (“drank more than was good for me”), and think of himself as every bit as much an “ass” as he does about his “boyhood” now. Meredith closes this letter with a resigned fatalism that, as I shall later show, is much in accord with the voice of the third-person speaker in the final sonnets of *Modern Love*.

Though some aspects of these letters, especially their cynicism towards women and love, resemble the ontological confusion typical of *Modern Love*, they do contain some hints of the optimistic “philosophy” Meredith was moving toward. He describes a good woman, for example, as having “principle,” “courage,” a “sense of responsibility,” strength, and “force” within her soul to “wrestle with the facts of life” (105). These are traditionally masculine, even martial, virtues, and far removed from the purity, beauty, sweetness, and good temper expected of most Victorian brides. They are, in fact, the virtues possessed by the great heroines of Meredith's novels. The phrase “force . . . to wrestle with the facts of life (called the Angel of the Lord)” is perhaps most telling. It resonates in a complex way with sonnet X (see page 12) of *Modern Love*. In that sonnet,

the husband describes his wife as someone who “mince[s] / The facts of life” (X.13-14). He associates his wife with Love, and the two dissolve, in his mind, into a single untrustworthy feminine principle. Love, he states, is a “thing of moods,” symbolized by “deep woods,” like Dante's *selva oscura*, that “jealously” block him from sight of the Apollonian sun. “Life,” on the other hand, is for the husband the Real. Life is masculine, “hard,” “loyal,” governed by rational “laws.” The husband casts himself as a Spenserian hero and his wife as a Duessa who would reduce him to a knight of the boudoir, holding him captive in her artificial dreamworld. In doing so, she would emasculate him: he would go about foppishly “[w]ith hindward feather and with forward toe / Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!” (X.15-16). He has to escape her clutches, he implies, in order to improve himself and be of use to society (“I plotted to be worthy of the world”).²⁵ But she, and the universe at large, he claims, have conspired to “condemn” him for doing so. The careful reader observes, however, that this claim is an elaborate dodge intended to justify his behavior. He is merely taking on a new role: that of the martyr or the unjustly imprisoned hero. In doing so, ironically, the husband is escaping into the sentimental romanticism of which he has just accused his wife.

Meredith's canny exploration of the husband's attempts to exculpate himself in this sonnet is all the more interesting given that he, too, wanted to find a woman who would have “force . . . to wrestle with the facts of life” (I.121). The husband, in this sonnet, comes close to articulating a central thesis of Meredith's philosophy: that one must be scrupulously honest with one's self, never taking refuge in romantic and self-serving

²⁵The phrase “the puppet of a dream” is ambiguous: the husband may mean that his wife wanted him to be ruled by *her* dreams, or that he was driven by *his* youthful dream. Meredith likely introduced this ambiguity purposely: while the husband attempts to blame his wife for holding him back, subconsciously he realizes that his “dreams,” too, were illusive.

illusions. One can sense this philosophy in development in Meredith's letters. Meredith tells Maxse, for instance, to carefully, patiently, and rationally examine his motives for wanting to marry Cecelia. "The great difficulty is to be honest with ourselves," (I.115) he writes, aware that one can all too easily be carried away by a romantic "fancy"--say, a Richard Feverel-style escapade of eloping with the woman one's parents disapprove of, or proposing in haste, carried away by a "wave of passion." Meredith advises Maxse to "listen to [his] doubt," figuring doubt as an instinct or voice of reason that can easily be ignored when one is in love. At the same time, as sonnet X suggests, Meredith recognized that even his newfound philosophy of reason and moderation could be bent to egoistic ends. Constant vigilance against illusion, a willingness to "wrestle with the facts of life" again and again, he believed, was the only way to guard against such self-deception.

The cautious optimism of Meredith's philosophy is also reflected in these letters. To Maxse, Meredith expresses the hope that Cecelia "can be made" strong and that she will live up to Maxse's "mighty wish for her." Though he believes, at this point in his life, that one can never really know a woman's character, he is willing to have faith in Maxse's "instinct" that Cecelia possesses good qualities and will only improve as she grows older. In Meredith's later novels, especially *Diana of the Crossways*, his characters will often have "instinctual" senses of a person's character and soul, and will help one another to live up to the potential they see in these brief glimpses. Though they will struggle with feelings of fragmentation and despair, this slender thread of hope will serve them like an anchor, keeping them close to the path of right reason.

While writing *Modern Love*, then, Meredith was far from the same man he was during and immediately after the breakdown of his marriage. Though still skeptical about

marriage as an institution, given that he saw women as so changeable, he was willing to believe that one could have a strong marriage if one examined one's conscience honestly and chose a woman of promising character. He was also beginning to develop the philosophy that would form the backbone, though never the dogma, of his greatest novels. Meredith was well aware of this change, and, I believe, reflected on it in *Modern Love*. In that poem three separate “selves,” all fictionalizations of various stages in Meredith's own life, are discernible: the idealistic youth whom we can only make inferences about from what the first-person speaker tells us; the embittered, disillusioned first-person speaker (whom I will henceforth refer to as “the husband”); and the gentler, wiser, though still imperfect third-person speaker (whom I will henceforth call “the speaker” to differentiate him from the husband).

The husband imagines his younger self as almost a separate person, someone cut off from him entirely. He speaks as though there had been one defining event that marked the breach between his two selves (“The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!”) (III.16), though, when he looks back, he cannot determine when or what that event was (“But where began the change, and what's my crime?”) (X.1). His most frequent metaphor for his younger days is Eden, and he figures the collapse of his marriage as the Fall.²⁶ As the poem goes on, however, images of his former self become tangled up with images of something else the husband has lost: belief in order in the universe.

The husband hearkens back to the Renaissance as a time period when, he surmises, people had faith in a benevolent God and man knew his place in a divinely ordered

²⁶As Comstock writes, the husband “covertly erects a protection against this inevitable condition of postlapsarian language by pinning its cause to a specific ‘change.’ In making the difficulties of interpretation a ‘serpent’ brought to life only through his wife's betrayal, the narrator suggests that such uncertainty is only an unfortunate by-product of her action, not an inevitable aspect of existence” (133).

cosmos.²⁷ His youth, he imagines, was like his personal Renaissance, a time when he was happy, idealistic, and untroubled by the philosophical qualms that now plague him. In sonnet VIII, for example, he makes use of the Renaissance conceit of music as symbolic of the divinely inspired orderliness of the universe:²⁸

But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
And they were music till he flung them down,
Used! Used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death! (VIII.8-12).

Once, the husband says, he and his wife were inspired, in both senses of the word, by Apollo, god of music, reason, and that masculine symbol par excellence, the sun.²⁹ Now, they produce only “discord,” and a “gross” rustic is their muse. They have fallen in genre from poetry to a bawdy pastoral. To the idealistic, somewhat snobbish husband, this is “worse than death”; death would have been noble, aesthetically pleasing, even, unlike disgrace. This mythologizing of his situation, though, does enable the husband to avoid responsibility for the breakdown of his marriage. The image of the God flinging them down is reminiscent of the Fall, but, here, the Fall was brought about by entropy rather than sin (“Used! Used!”).

²⁷Meredith’s use of the amatory sonnet sequence form, of course, underscores the difference between the orderly cosmos of a Dante or a Petrarch and the ontological chaos experienced by the husband. For detailed analyses of the parallels between *Modern Love* and its Renaissance predecessors, see Houston (99-121) and Golden (264-84). For technical analysis of the sonnet form used in the poem, see Regan (17-28) and Reader’s “Stanza Form in *Modern Love*.”

²⁸Music is a metaphor that will recur throughout the poem. In sonnet XVIII, for instance, a fiddler plays for a group of rustics at a country dance; the husband cannot share in this music, which belongs to those, like the peasants who follow Nature and live for the day. The “whole instrument” of the wife’s body “trembles” in sonnet XV. The moon in sonnets XXXVII and XXXIX has “the face of Music mute” (XXXVII.11).

²⁹The sun is yet another recurring symbol. See especially sonnet X, where “Love’s jealous woods about the sun are curled” (9). Friedman sees it as both “a paradisaal symbol of the Ideal” and “a vehicle of excessive idealism” (16).

Throughout the poem, the husband utilizes various strategies to help him come to terms with his past. At one point, he attempts to recapture his youthful elation, and the belief in transcendent Truth that went along with it, by idolizing his mistress. He finds, to his regret, that such emotion cannot be forced:

Am I failing? For no longer can I cast
A glory round about this head of gold.
Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;
Not like the consecration of the Past!³⁰ (XXIX.1-4)

Only briefly, when he wins the mistress's heart, does he regain a sense of order in the universe:

O visage of still music in the sky!
Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!
True harmony within can apprehend
Dumb harmony without! (XXXIX.5-8)

His joy is short-lived, however: upon seeing his wife with her lover, the moon suddenly becomes a “dancing spectre” (XXXIX.16). The swiftness with which the moon turns ghost puts the lie to the husband's pretensions: the reader realizes the husband has been forcing his rapture throughout the sonnet.³¹ Elsewhere, the husband tries to convince himself that he is better off now than he was in his youth, which he portrays as a time of sentimental illusion.³² Still another strategy is to embrace his “fall from grace” and take on a persona like that of Milton's Satan. This persona suits his romanticism, while allowing him to justify taking a mistress. As “Satan,” the husband can give both his ego and his sensual appetites free reign:

³⁰ The husband means that he was able to “consecrate” his wife in the past, but Meredith likely intends the other meaning of the phrase as well, that the husband consecrates *his* past.

³¹ The superfluity of exclamation points in this sonnet is another sign that the husband's happiness is not completely genuine, as is his catty remark that the mistress is “more sweet than those / Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood,” as his wife presumably did when he first met her.

³² Sonnet X is the most characteristic example.

And if the devil snare me, body and mind,
Here gratefully I score:--he seem'd kind,
When not a soul would comfort my distress!
O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!
O Lady, once I gave love: now I take!
Lady, I must be flattered. Shouldst thou wake
The passion of a demon, be not afraid. (XXVII.10-16)

For I must shine
Envied,--I lessened in my proper sight!
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.
Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:
And men shall see me as a burning sphere;
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!
I feel the promptings of Satanic power,
While you do homage unto me alone. (XXVIII.7-16)

For a while, the husband revels in this Black Mass-style parodying of divine order, in which his wife becomes the harlot (he names her “Madam”) and his mistress (“Lady”) takes on aristocratic splendor. Instead of being jealous of his wife's gaze, he can bask in the reflected glow of the envy of other men at his mistress's beauty. It seems refreshingly honest to him to admit to his egoism (“Lady, I must be flattered”) instead of “hypocritically” covering it over. But the Satanic pose, too, is short-lived. The husband, to his credit, recognizes that sensuality without spirituality is empty (“I cannot be at peace / In having Love upon a mortal lease”) (XXIX.6-7) and that it still leaves him vulnerable to the specter of mortality:

Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
Our human nakedness, and could endow
With spiritual splendour a white brow
That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed? (XXIX.9-12)

Remembering that he once had faith, the husband comes full circle, and begins to envy his past self again. Furthermore, though he does not realize it, he never escaped the spell

of his past self to begin with, as Satan still belongs to a worldview which recognizes the divine.

The husband's most frequent stance towards his younger self, though, is one of nostalgia. Only in sonnet XII does he briefly entertain the notion that bothers him the most: the fear that he might be mistaken about his perceptions of the past. His wife, he complains, has destroyed his happiness in the present and his hope for the future, which he could find tolerable were it not for the fact that she has taken the past from him, too:

Methinks with all this loss I were content,
If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole
Of life is mixed: the mocking Past will stay (XII.11-14).

The husband thinks that he could bear it if he knew that at one point in his life his existence had meaning and purpose, allowing him to cling to his myth of the Fall, but he has come to distrust his perceptions so much that he no longer has even that consolation. The husband represses this thought soon after it comes to the surface, and goes on to reminisce longingly about the past and to use the trope of the Fall. But his anxiety about the truth of his perceptions remains, and it underlies his words during most of the sonnet sequence, lending them an overtone of unreliability.

The harmony the husband associates with the Renaissance and with his younger self stands in sharp contrast to the detachment from direct experience that characterizes his “modern” self. He expresses the divide between the two most eloquently in sonnet XXVI:

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
The fatal web below while far he flies.
But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,

Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
 A subtle serpent then has Love become.
 I had the eagle in my bosom erst:
 Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.
 I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.
 Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.
 Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:
 But be no coward:--you that made Love bleed,
 You must bear all the venom of his tooth! (XXVI.1-16)

In its first stage Love—and in many ways, the husband himself—is portrayed as enjoying an almost timeless existence. Like the angels of *Paradise Lost*, it flies so high that it can see both evening and dawn happening at once down on earth. Love is characterized by his freedom from plots and entanglements; the fatal (in both senses of the word) web of narrative has not yet ensnared him. Once wounded, though, by an arrow that recalls Cupid's, he can only move in a “track” and is enchained, bound “with narrow range.” Pain brings about the Fall that renders Love—and the husband—satanic. Significantly, he is cursed with modernity. He can no longer accept experience at face value but is compelled to “interpret” everything. Exteriors, especially human exteriors, do not correspond to interiors, leaving the husband caught in a “web” of ever-shifting signs. His wife's every blink, blush, and smile becomes part of a code he must decipher (“Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in / By shutting all too zealous for their sin: / Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask”[II.2-4]; “What may the woman labour to confess? / There is about her mouth a nervous twitch. / 'Tis something to be told, or hidden:-- which?” [XXII.1-3]; “By stealth / Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes.” [XXXIV.8-9]). Worse, he discovers, is that there is no unalloyed truth existing without a “side-lie.”

As is true of many Meredithian characters, the husband feels as though there are two parts to his self: an outer, social self which speaks and acts, and is the face he presents to

the world, and a more authentic inner self which thinks and feels and schemes. The husband suffers from a disconnect between these two selves. In social life, he feels condemned to hypocrisy:

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
The Topic over intellectual deeps
In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
It is in truth a most contagious game:
HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.
Such play as this, the devils might appal!
But here's the greater wonder; in that we
Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,
Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;
Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe,
Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
We waken envy of our happy lot.
Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light
shine. (XVII.1-16)

The truth of their marriage, such that it is, is a ghost or skeleton they have to keep hidden.

The husband, who views happier men like the friend in sonnet XXI as inhabiting an other, charmed world from himself, may feel a duty to protect his guests from this knowledge. The husband sees them in much the same light as he does his younger self: they are naïve believers in love, who do not deserve to be disillusioned. In some ways, he feels superior to them, and enjoys duping them. He can revel once more in his role of the “sadder but wiser man” who has been stripped of all his illusions. But the husband also realizes this acting is “unnatural.” He makes several references, in this sonnet, to the banquet scene in *Macbeth* in which only Macbeth can see the “blood-bolter'd Banquo.” But Macbeth knew he sinned *against* the social and natural order in killing Duncan. When he said, “[I am a man], and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appal

the devil” (III.IV), he was referring to his act of regicide. When the husband, however, states, “Such play as this, the devils might appal!,” he means that his play-acting is *outside* the natural order.

For the husband feels as though there is a buffer or barrier between himself and the external world. There is a quality of stasis, or death-in-life, to his existence. The wife, his primary mirror, appears ghostly: she stands “wavering pale” (XXII.11) before him without speaking; a “cruel lovely pallor . . . surrounds / Her footsteps” (XXIV.6-7); she is a “phantom-woman in the Past” (III.15); her “lost moist hand clings mortally” to his (XXI.16); she is always “cool” and “pale.” He too is among the “human shades” (XLI.7), one of the company who “thread” “in and out, in silvery dusk” (XXXVII.13), dragging “Love's nerveless body” like an albatross “thro' all time” (X.4). Time seems almost to have stopped for him: he no longer remembers the past with any joy, nor looks forward to the future, and the only certainty is death.

One reason the husband describes his life as such purgatory is that he has become disconnected from sense experience. Everything is at a remove for him; he can no longer act directly on his emotions without some other process intervening. His instincts and emotions must always pass through the filter of his mind before he can express them, with the result being that they rarely get expressed at all, at least not in their original form. In time, the husband comes to doubt whether he even *has* genuine, unalloyed emotions. Desire, for him, seems to exist at a remove from the desired object. His desire is always mediated through a second person. In sonnet XL, for example, he states that he has only (temporarily) returned to his wife because her lover wanted her, too. He contrasts this with his “genuine” passion for his mistress:

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
 When others pick it up becomes a gem!
 We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;
 And by reflected light its worth is found.
 Yet for us still 'tis nothing! And that zeal
 Of false appreciation quickly fades.
 This truth is little known to human shades,
 How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!
 They waste the soul with spurious desire,
 That is not the ripe flame upon the bough.³³
 We two have taken up a lifeless vow
 To rob a living passion: dust for fire! (XLI.1-12)

The husband is very familiar with this phenomenon, having taken on a mistress partly to arouse the envy of other men: “And men shall see me as a burning sphere; /And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan / To be the God of such a grand sunflower!” (XXVIII.12-14). He regards human interactions as based entirely on spite, competition, and power games: he wants a beautiful mistress not so he can enjoy her beauty, but so he can hurt other men and his wife. He takes his wife back to harm her lover, and because he feared missing out on something desirable; like a greedy child, he clutches at her, not willing to relinquish his possession even though he values it no longer. The husband knows this state of mind is at once infantile and the mark of a mature, seasoned egoist, and that it saps the spirit. He likens such “spurious desire” to a kind of death-in-life, calling it “dust for fire” and those who experience it “human shades” with wasted souls. His understanding of his situation, however, only makes it worse. Knowledge brings him painful consciousness but not the will to action.

Perhaps part of the husband's problem is that, in trying hard to not become bestial, he has lost the animal passions and energy that would enable him to break out of his

³³In sonnet XL, though, the husband speaks of his wife as “[t]his woman, who's to Love as fire to wood” (XL.10). Perhaps in XLI, he is merely trying to convince himself that his newfound feeling for his wife is but “spurious desire . . . not the ripe flame upon the bough” (9-10). Or perhaps the keen pain his wife brings him *is* the only emotion he does not doubt.

paralysis. “More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar / Utterly this fair garden we might win,” (XLVIII.2-3), he prays in sonnet XLVIII, but he may be better off asking for more “blood” instead. He does evince a distrust for pure “appetite” in several sonnets, sonnet XXXVIII in particular. There, he asserts,

Give to imagination some pure light
In human form to fix it, or you shame
The devils with that hideous human game:--
Imagination urging appetite!
Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,
Who dazzle us, whom we can not revere:
Imagination is the charioteer
That, in default of better, drives the hogs. (XXXVIII.1-8)

The husband rewrites Plato's metaphor of the faculties to fit his own view of the psyche, replacing reason with imagination as the “charioteer,” and the horses of emotion and desire with the “hogs” of appetite. Tellingly, he avers that the chief human faculty is not reason, which seeks Truth, but imagination, which creates fictions. There is no Truth in the husband's universe, which is why he terms his thoughts and actions a “hideous human game”; in the absence of the Real, everything is a sort of game.³⁴ The “devils” would be “shamed” because they, too, are part of the Real. Creatures who vitiate against Truth, they yet require a Truth to act in opposition to.

The husband also views imagination as a relentless force that cannot be curbed, only directed. Imagination, he believes, can bring about good, of a limited sort, or at least delusional happiness, if it has the proper material to work with. In lieu of such material, though, it stirs up “appetite,” which the husband sees not as a force (a “horse”) which drives one, but as an animalistic urge that can only degrade. He thus finds himself in a double bind, longing for direct, passionate experience (“a living passion,” “the ripe flame

³⁴As Comstock writes, “the endless proliferations of convention and artifice threaten the possibility of an essential reality by suggesting it to be indistinguishable from its deceptive substitute” (137).

upon the bough”) but viewing such a desire as base (“Pluck out the eyes of pride! thy mouth to mine! / Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!”) (XXIV.15-16). He cannot reconcile reason with sense experience. The local peasants, who thoroughly enjoy their drinking, dancing, and uncomplicated loves, seem happier than he, but also more akin to the animals (“Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near. . . . They have the secret of the bull and lamb” [XVIII.13,15]; “You burly lovers on the village green, / Yours is a lower, and a happier star!” [XXII.15-16]). He, on the other hand, possesses a keen intellect, which in his mind makes him higher and more human (“What are we first? First, animals; and next / Intelligences at a leap”) (XXX.1-2) but prevents him from enjoying unalloyed sense experience. “Intelligence and instinct,” (XXX.8) he complains, are only united when one is in love—and even that is a short-lived and illusory state (“Swift doth young Love flee, / And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream”) (XXX.11-12).

The husband, then, is a man who looks back on his former self with a mixture of nostalgia and contempt. He sees his youth as a time when the world was pregnant with meaning, but, now, he regards himself as having been deluded. He vacillates between believing he was better off when deluded, and deriving some small satisfaction from the fact that he now knows that the world is wholly material. A complex and mutable character, the husband is rarely systematic in his thinking. He will take a firm stance in one sonnet only to deconstruct it in the next. His philosophical speculations are inextricably intertwined with his personal life, and are often rooted in his insecurities, his egoism, or his love-hate relationship with his wife. Nor is he dogmatic: he often calls upon God or the devil in spite of himself, and images often well up from his

subconscious to expose him. In short, the husband is a brilliant, coruscating character, at turns repugnant and deeply familiar. Though he provides readers with few answers to the problem of life, and ends the poem in a black despair, he remains a remarkable creation on the part of Meredith.

The speaker, too, is a complicated character in his own right. Though not as fully developed as the husband, he does lend the reader crucial insights that the husband cannot. As the speaker is not currently embroiled in a personal crisis, he is able to see his former selves from a more objective vantage point. He evinces compassion for both his past self and his wife, but, at the same time, he holds his former self up to a scrupulous standard of conscience and finds him wanting. Meredith's deployment of the speaker's narration also casts a critical light upon the husband: the mere juxtaposition of the two viewpoints is often enough to call the reader's attention to the husband's character flaws and to the unfairness of the accusations he levels at his wife. But the speaker's voice is not to be taken as wholly objective or omniscient: he too is a character in the poem who necessarily views his past self from a partial, self-interested perspective, even as he serves as a corrective to that past self.

A key function of the speaker is to establish sympathy for the wife. Without him, the reader might be unduly influenced by the husband's bitterness, and come to see her as the wanton, fickle creature he portrays her as. In sonnet VIII, for example, the husband briefly pities his wife, but quickly descends into histrionics that threaten to occlude her pain:

Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!
Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?

My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped
As balm for any bitter wound of mine:
My breast will open for thee at a sign! (VIII.3-7)

In these lines, he recalls both Hamlet (“Queen Worm,” “Wretched queen, adieu!”) and Christ, sometimes figured as the pelican who will tear open its breast to feed its children, both self-aggrandizing roles that position him as the wronged party. He enjoys the feeling of moral superiority engendered by pitying the one who hurt him, and dons the role of martyr in consequence; rather than act on his pity by attempting to forgive his wife, he mediates this troublesome emotion through cultural scripts that instead serve to palliate his ego. The husband ends the sonnet, though, with the admission that his wife is central to his identity:

I do not know myself without thee more:
In this unholy battle I grow base:
If the same soul be under the same face,
Speak, and a taste of that old time restore! (VIII.13-16)

The husband, with his needs and his emotions, dominates this poem; the wife, a mystery who may hide a different “soul” beneath “the same face,” becomes little more than a stimulus for the husband's meditations. Much of *Modern Love* is like this: the husband is at once obsessed with his wife, endlessly mulling over what she's done to him and how he should respond to her, and indifferent to her as a sovereign person with her own needs and desires. An ancestor of Sir Willoughby's, he uses her as a mirror in which to see his own reflection.

The speaker, aware of the husband's egoism, performs the twofold role of highlighting the husband's moral failings and making sure the wife remains in the poem.³⁵ In sonnet

³⁵See also sonnet I, in which the speaker stresses the point that the couple are *both* miserable and anxious to leave their marriage.

VIII, for example, he provides a competing voice with the opening lines, “Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt / Of righteous feeling made her pitiful” (VIII.1-2).³⁶ The speaker reminds the reader that the wife is a complex person in her own right: she has done wrong, but at least “struggles” against her sin, even if that struggle is perfunctory (“salt / Of righteous feeling”). Her moral wrangling, he intimates, makes her worthy of compassion. The speaker shows a similar kind of qualified compassion to the husband in sonnet II, writing that the husband “fainted on his vengefulness, and strove / To ape the magnanimity of love, / And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain” (II.14-16). This image is suggestive of Meredith’s tag for Willoughby Patterne--“for love of self himself he slew”--in its circularity. The husband, in trying to hurt his wife, “smites” himself as well, and even in trying to do right by his wife the best he can manage is “aping” magnanimity. The speaker’s phrase “a shuddering heap of pain” hints both at the formlessness and lack of structure in the husband’s view of the world, where the only constant is pain. Though he does not excuse the husband for his behavior, the speaker recognizes the fact that he is suffering and the ontological trap he is caught in, and is able to look upon with compassion.

In sonnet V the speaker reveals a side to the husband’s continued attraction to his wife that the husband does not even want to admit to himself. When the husband contemplates kissing his wife in sonnet III, it is with bleak resignation: “But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well / I claim a star whose light is overcast: / I claim a phantom-woman in the Past” (III.13-15). After he does kiss her, he reads guilt into the simple lowering of her eyes: “Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die” (VI.III) and inwardly rages at her:

³⁶The word “yet,” placed at the start of these lines suggests that the speaker is thoughtfully reconsidering a position he previously took, in this case that the wife was blameworthy. It also places the speaker in an implicit “debate” with the husband.

“The love is here; it has but changed its aim. / O bitter barren woman! what's the name? /

The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?” (VI.10-12). The speaker, though,

reads the moment of the kiss quite differently:

Familiar was her shoulder in the glass,
Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass
That a changed eye finds such familiar sights
More keenly tempting than new loveliness.
The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own:
The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,
Nor less divine: Love's inmost sacredness,
Called to him, 'Come!--In his restraining start,
Eyes nurtured to be looked at, scarce could see
A wave of the great waves of Destiny
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart. (V.6-16)

He observes that, in that moment, the wife appears touched with grace to her husband.

Her unknowability, at other times a cause for deep frustration, now takes on the character of a sacred “mystery.” He is “tempted” not only by her sexual allure, which he typically renders as a trap intended to lower him to the state of an animal, but by a piquant combination of her familiarity and his new perspective on her. Momentarily, he responds to her as a person in a dynamic, intriguing process of change, rather than as a surface off which to reflect his own fears and desires. The speaker regards this as a lost opportunity, a brief window of time during which the husband may have tried to reconcile with his wife. The husband fails to seize the moment, and sinks back into recrimination of his wife in the following sonnet. Even so, the speaker still has sympathy for him, describing his eyes as “nurtured to be looked at.” The word *nurtured* is suggestive of the basic, almost infantile need the husband has for his wife's gaze and attention, giving readers insight into what drives his fury towards her.

Despite his sympathy for the husband, the speaker does criticize some aspects of his behavior, especially his penchant for role-playing. In sonnet IX he gently mocks the husband's assumption of the persona of a Gothic villain:

He felt the wild beast in him betweenwhiles
So masterfully rude, that he would grieve
To see the helpless delicate thing receive
His guardianship through certain dark defiles.
Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?
But still he spared her. Once: 'Have you no fear?'
He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.
She laughed: 'No, surely; am I not with you?'
And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she leaned
Her gentle body near him, looking up;
And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,
He drank until the fluttering eyelids screened.
Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam
Of heaven's circle-glory! Here thy shape
To squeeze like an intoxicating grape--
I might, and yet thou goest safe, supreme. (IX.1-16)

This sonnet teeters between seriousness and absurdity. Couched in the third person, the husband's dramatic posturing sounds absurd. He imagines, according to the speaker, himself as a "wild beast" with "teeth to rend, and hunger too," his wife as a "helpless delicate thing" *and* a "[d]evilish malignant witch" and their daily routine as "certain dark defiles." But this sonnet almost certainly has a domestic setting, as does the rest of the poem,³⁷ rendering the husband's imaginings somewhat silly. From his safe distance, the speaker regards his past self as absurdly pompous and self-aggrandizing.

At the same time, though, there is a psychological truth to the Gothic melodrama the husband concocts. The wife may not be in physical danger from his "teeth" and "hunger," but he certainly can wound her psyche with his verbal barbs and his unmet needs. In the

³⁷In the poems that have a clear setting, the wife and husband hold a dinner (XVII), stroll on the lawn (XXI), attend a Christmas party at a country house (XXIII), and perambulate on a garden terrace awaiting dinner (XXXVII). The only sublime setting in the poem is the seashore.

context of her suicide, the Gothic overtones of this sonnet become all too ominous. Moreover, the archetypes of the villain, the maiden, and the witch hang over much of the poem, influencing both characters' behavior as they negotiate with these roles. In certain ways, their domestic tragedy *is* a fairy tale gone wrong; in other ways, though, the archetypes seem larger than life, out of place in a piddling extended squabble between two bourgeois Victorians. (As Bernstein observes, "This deepening into myth may also present levels of awareness not fully accessible to the daylight consciousness of the husband and wife" [10]). This uneasiness pervades much of *Modern Love*. The characters, especially the husband, feel the weight of history and culture behind their story, and, beyond that the archetypes that have driven that culture, and yet they feel too small to inhabit those archetypes for any length of time. Only the wife breaks through the impasse, committing to a role and sealing it with her death.

In the final sonnets of the sequence, we see the husband in the process of becoming the speaker. Gradually, he comes to pity his wife, then to sympathize with, and finally to admire her and see her for the complex, sovereign person that she is.³⁸ His change of heart begins in sonnet XLII. When his wife first leads him to bed in that sonnet, he assumes this is just another one of her attempts at playing a martyr. She is trying to take the moral high ground by conceding him his marital rights, he thinks, thereby proving him animalistic and herself spiritually superior. In the bedroom, though, she reveals her heart to him:

Within those secret walls what do I see?
Where first she set the taper down she stands:

³⁸Some critics argue that the husband does not change in any significant way at the close of the sonnet. Comstock reads the husband's newfound understanding as another one of his "highly provisional . . . narratives" (136) and states there is no reason to regard it as having any more truth value than his other fictions. The change in the husband's tone and his attitude towards his wife, though, are undeniable.

Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! Thoughts black as death,
Like a stirred pool in sunshine break. Her wrists
I catch: she faltering, as she half resists,
'You love . . . ? love . . . ? love . . . ?' all on an indrawn
breath. (XLII.11-16)

Whether intentionally or not, the wife lets down her guard. Her questioning of her husband, probably about his love for the mistress, reveals that she still cares for him. For once, she is not playing a role or trying to manipulate her husband: her “faltering” and stuttering speech point to her sincerity. This small break in the couple's prideful play-acting lets loose a cascade of emotion on both sides. The husband's “thoughts black as death / Like a stirred pool in sunshine break” (XLII.13-14), and he begins to look on his wife with renewed kindness. This admission on the wife's part will not be enough to reconcile the couple, but it does begin to soften the husband's bitter cynicism.

In the very next sonnet, in fact, the husband takes on the resigned position adopted by the speaker. Though he knows his marriage is dead, he expresses a more equitable viewpoint about what led to its demise:

I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within. (XLIII.13-16).

The husband says, more or less, that the decline of their marriage was inevitable. He relegates his “passions” to the same status he did “imagination” and “appetite”: they are forces within him that he cannot control, only go along with. The husband also points to “what is false within,” by which he may mean the “side-lie” or inescapable untruth that he sees as part of human nature, as complicit in the failure of his marriage. By doing so he denies any responsibility for what went wrong (“we are betrayed”), but neither does he blame his wife.

The speaker, too, blames inscrutable dark forces for the couple's woe:

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep question, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!--
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore! (L.1-16)

Though he sees the couple as over-interpreting one another's actions ("that fatal knife, / Deep questioning") and longing too much for bygone happiness rather than moving forward ("they fed not on the advancing hours: / Their hearts held cravings for the buried day." (L.7-8), by and large he argues that there is little they could have done to prevent their tragedy. Their situation was to blame far more than they were; like the brilliant, ill-matched Meredith and Mary, perhaps, they felt trapped by the marriage yoke ("These two were rapid falcons in a snare, / Condemned to do the flitting of the bat." [L.3-4]). More than this, though, he convicts, the dark, mysterious force represented by the sea (in the memorable words of C. Day Lewis, "the circumambient Unknown whose volume of mystery presses upon the mortal heart, and breaking there, leaves only a 'faint thin line' of experience by which its force may be felt, its nature dimly understood" (qtd. in Friedman

9).³⁹ His estimation of the couple's failed marriage is equitable and takes into account factors they could and could not control.

Shortly after the husband decides neither he nor his wife is the “villain” of their drama, his idea of his situation changes. He becomes resigned to living in a world where Love has “robbed [him] of immortal things” (XLVII.13) and, weary of wrangling and play-acting, only “look[s] for peace” (XLVIII.5). He can be content, now, with small, quiet moments of happiness, such as the sight of a swan sheltering her young (XLVII).⁴⁰ Aware that he can no longer love his wife, at least not in the high romantic way which he terms Love, he hopes simply to reconcile with her. Watt terms this the “abated” ending of the poem, “serenely stable” rather than comic or tragic. This kind of ending is appropriate, he claims, given the fact that the husband is a complex character, neither good nor evil, and only partially to blame for the breakdown of his marriage (165-9). The wife, however, cannot accept an “abated” ending. She refuses to accept the husband's pity as a substitute for Love:

She for the Temple's worship has paid price,
And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.
She sees through simulation to the bone:
What's best in her impels her to the worst:
Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,
Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone! (XLIV.11-16)

³⁹Kozicki, interestingly, reads the ocean as the subconscious and the “faint thin line” as “the ground on which behavior occurs, at the juncture of the unconscious and the conscious” (159). Simpson posits that the “line” “represents the minor, transient, and essentially valueless results available to the human understanding of the forces that shape human life to such a great degree” (354). McGhee regards the ocean as symbolic of passion and marriage as a “ship” which is supposed to carry couples safely over it. This couple's “ship,” of course, has been “wrecked” (163). Many critics, including Kozicki, Lund, and Ostrom, also see the final sonnet as an oblique reference to “Dover Beach” and the sense of alienation that poem evokes.

⁴⁰Bernstein reads this moment as a rare one in *Modern Love* in which “[t]he mind's imaginings—those amber cradles and dead infants—give way to perceptions of qualities in the scene itself” (14). Though the husband does seem to perceive nature with less interference from his anxieties and his ego in this sonnet, in some respects, he does still read himself into it.

The husband admires his wife's passion and integrity. She longs for the powerful, direct kind of emotional experiences he has given up; she will not be content with moderate emotion. Love, for her, he sees, has the same resonance Truth once did for him. Her desire for genuine emotion reminds him, once more, of his youth, but he does not fault her for it, only worries that “[w]hat's best in her” (her integrity) “impels her to what's worst” (her sentimentality).

For a time, the husband attempts to win his wife over to his vision of peace and what honesty human beings are capable of. He convinces himself that she shares his delight in the simple joys of nature (“Our spirits grew as we went side by side. / The hour became her husband and my bride.” [XLVII.6-7]), and that they are finally able to converse openly with one another (“Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each. / We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.” [XLVIII.6-7]). But he seems to want this so much that he assumes his wife shares his thoughts and feelings when, actually, she is thinking something quite different. Therefore, he is utterly shocked when she runs away, thinking she is freeing him to be with his mistress.

His response to her flight, though, is nuanced. He recognizes it as a sentimental gesture on her part, raging, “Their sense is with their senses all mixed in, / Destroyed by subtleties these women are!”⁴¹ (XLVIII.1-2). Beneath his casual misogyny, though, a note of exasperated worry, even genuine panic, is detectable. “I do adore the nobleness! Despise / The act!,” he states, realizing his wife is overly romantic, but also that she had good intentions mixed in with her more questionable ones. At long last, he has come to see his wife as a complex, multifaceted individual, and not as a “devilish malignant

⁴¹In a letter to Jessopp, Meredith called *Modern Love* “a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days” (qtd. in Bartlett 116).

witch” or a chilly Pallas. The “hard world,” he fears, will be far more likely to stereotype her.

The wife's suicide, likewise, is another act of melodramatic romanticism on her part. Again, the wife plays the martyr, here a piquant combination of Sidney Carton and Juliet (“Now kiss me, dear! It may be, now!” [XLIX.15]). The speaker, though, is able to view her with compassion. He laments the fact that she could not choose to be honest with her husband (“She dared not say, ‘This is my breast: look in.’” [L.9]), but observes that she is “shadow-like and dry” (L.6) and “desperate weak” (L.10) as mitigating factors. With mingled pity and admiration, the speaker notes her commitment to illusion:

And she believed his old love had returned,
Which was her exultation, and her scourge.
.....
She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,
And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed. (L.3-4, 7-8)

He depicts her as both weak and unable to face hard facts *and* as a kind of perverse artist. Faced with an existence “robbed . . . of immortal things,” she chooses instead to end her life with one beautiful gesture. Sonnet L is her elegy. The speaker commemorates her transformation of nihilism into tragedy by couching his last words in the voice of a dramatic chorus. He can offer little consolation to his readers, save for the fact that his grand passionate Love for his wife has evolved, albeit too late, into love.

CHAPTER 3

“CURRENTS OF FEELING, OUR NATURES”: THE MOBILE PSYCHE IN *THE EGOIST*

In the Prelude to *The Egoist*, Meredith makes a bold claim. He diagnoses his culture as suffering from the “malady of sameness,” and states that Art is the proper “specific” for such a disease. His novel, he states, acts as a homeopathic cure in that it gives readers a small, highly condensed dose of egoism, refined in the “stillatory of Comedy,” which can inoculate them against outbreaks of the “malady” in their own lives. The story of Willoughby Patterne holds a mirror up to society in which readers can see their own egoism, and, recognizing it, “escape” with “clearer minds and livelier manners . . . into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns” (4).

Certain Victorian readers did find *The Egoist* an efficient remedy. W. E. Henley, for example, reviewing the book in the *Athenaeum*, declared that “Sir Willoughby Patterne is a ‘document on humanity’ of the highest value; and to him who would know of egoism and the egoist the study of Sir Willoughby is indispensable. There is something in him of us all” (qtd. in Williams 209). A friend of Meredith’s, having read the novel, exclaimed, “This is too bad of you. Sir Willoughby is me!,” to which Meredith replied, “No, my dear fellow, he is all of us”; Robert Louis Stevenson, meanwhile, found Willoughby “an unmanly but a very serviceable exposure of [him]self” (Stevenson 245).

Later critics, however, have been more skeptical of *The Egoist*’s claims to moral and social efficacy. Dorothy Van Ghent, for example, in her seminal essay in *The English Novel*, charges that Willoughby’s egoism is too extreme for him to function as a

corrective for readers. “Willoughby is treated as a perfectly lonely aberration, a freak,” she writes. “[W]e are not, *aesthetically*, given any insight as to what subtle internal bonds there might be between Willoughby and society . . . or as to what taint of identity there might be between the soul of Willoughby and the soul of anybody else” (189-90). Robert Adams and John Goode claim the novel’s comic plot gives it an inescapably conservative thrust. Adams observes that the characters have “no social reforms to propose, no political issues to urge,” that they lack religion almost entirely, and that “the novel . . . is not particularly interested in morality” (552-3). He attributes the characters’ insularity to the fact that the novel imitates a stage comedy. “Comedy,” he writes,

does not want to and cannot afford to look very carefully into the causes of things. It does not wish to see people as layered, motivated, committed; it does not wish to tease out the tangled roots of the past. . . . The clatter and collision of two-dimensional characters on a brightly lit stage is one description of comedy: it applies pretty well to Meredith’s, at least. (557)

Goode, likewise, states that Meredith’s novel is only progressive on the surface; in reality, it seeks to maintain the status quo. The society depicted in the novel, he claims, needs egoists to glitter atop its social hierarchy. Willoughby’s sin is not being an egoist but taking his egoism to an extreme; it is only he, and not his culture, that needs to be corrected (514-8).¹ Some feminist critics, notably Kate Millett and Carolyn Williams, have also found fault with the portrayal of Clara. They argue that, by having his heroine marry, Meredith merely recuperates her into the patriarchy.

When compared with the sweeping breadth of a novel by Dickens or Thackeray, *The Egoist* can feel like a rococo piece. All the action is confined to one country estate and compressed into a period of little over a week’s time; many of the minor characters are

¹Roberts, however, persuasively argues that the novel is not a pure comedy but one in which the limits of the comedic form are tested (179-81).

little more than types; and the often impossibly clever dialogue owes more to the stage than to actual conversation. Despite this patina of artificiality, I wish to argue, *The Egoist* is in fact a thoroughly politically engaged work that makes a compelling case for women's rights. In particular, I will show how the theories of John Stuart Mill influenced Meredith's descriptions of the power dynamics between men and women.² Furthermore, as I will delineate, Meredith does intend the novel to bring about societal change, albeit in a gradual, evolutionary fashion. With extraordinary acuity, he depicts the ways in which beliefs and stereotypes about gender penetrate deep into the psyches of men and women, and work, even on a subconscious level, to influence their behavior. The limited canvas of *Patterne Hall* allows him to focus, with laser-like precision, on men, women, ego, and marriage: its power dynamics are those of the Victorian household, exaggerated and stylized. Individual readers of the novel, Meredith hopes, will recognize themselves in it and improve themselves accordingly; change will then come about on the aggregate or species level. This chapter, I hope, will shed more light on Meredith's fascinating depictions of the human psyche, and on the intersections between the psyche and society as a whole.

Perhaps the most pivotal scene in *The Egoist* is the one where Clara discovers Vernon Whitford sleeping beneath a flowering cherry tree of extraordinary beauty and whiteness. She experiences awe and wonder at the tree's beauty, and comes away associating

²Meredith's friend John Morley gave him a copy of *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. As Morley remembers, "Meredith eagerly seized the book, fell to devouring it in settled silence, and could not be torn from it all day" (I, 47). Several critics, Hill, O'Hara, and Jonathan Smith among them, have noted that Meredith was influenced by Mill's theories, but none of them go into the topic in any detail.

Vernon with the majesty of Nature. This scene, I believe, also serves as an excellent entry point into the view of the psyche Meredith develops in *The Egoist*.

The “double-blossom wild cherry tree” scene is widely regarded as one of the most crucial in the novel, though critics differ on how it should be interpreted. The major issue in question is whether Clara’s epiphanic moment of communion with nature has any lasting effects, and what these effects are. Sundell and Conrow both point out that the tree is sterile, and read it as a symbol of the too-precious, static beauty of Patterne Hall, which enchants at first but must ultimately be left behind (Sundell 527; Conrow 200-1). Williams and O’Hara both lament the fact that Clara’s epiphany has to be tied to romantic attraction to a man. Her “momentary glimpse of independent consciousness,” Williams writes, is “transferred not to the presumptively gender-neutral love of universal ‘mankind’ (as in Wordsworth) but to romantic love for a particular man” (62-3). O’Hara, similarly, surmises that Clara identifies with the tree on an archetypal level. She sees in its pristine beauty an image of “a mythic virginity that denotes the power of an inviolate, self-determined womanhood” (13); this image, O’Hara writes, will soon “be compromised by real men and sexual longing: by novel’s end, Clara will metamorphose into Vernon’s ‘Mountain Echo’” (15).

These interpretations deal well with the symbolic freight of the cherry tree scene, but they do not touch upon the fascinating process of perception Meredith describes in the scene. The chapter provides one of the best instances in the novel of how Meredith viewed the interrelationship between perception, emotion, thought, and language. It provides important insight into the psyche in general and Clara’s individual psyche in particular:

She had a curiosity to know the title of the book [Vernon] would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay's hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: "He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!" She would rather have clung to her first impression: wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns: but the thought of it was no recovery of it; she might as well have striven to be a child. The sensation of happiness promised to be less short-lived in memory, and would have been, had not her present disease of the longing for happiness ravaged every corner for the secret of its existence. The reflection took root. "He must be good! . . . " That reflection vowed to endure. Poor by comparison with what it displaced, it presented itself to her as conferring something on him, and she would not have had it absent though it robbed her. (95)

Clara first experiences the tree not as a tree but as a pure sensation of whiteness. She perceives it as an uncorrupted Eve seeing it for the first time and not having the language to describe it. Her eyes are likened, significantly, to animals, namely birds, that "perch and soar" (95). She has to resort to a comparison to a remembered and known quantity, "higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight" (95), in order to conceptualize it.

From *wonder* at this moment of pre-linguistic perception, Clara passes to *happiness* "in the beauty of the tree," a sensation "more mortal and narrower" (95). Her conception of the tree becomes more sophisticated but more detached from the original experience: she attaches the aesthetic term "beauty" to it and can feel happy *that* it exists, rather than timelessly experiencing its existence. Clara spoils this sense of happiness by *thinking* and trying to consciously seek out the source of it.

At this point, Clara translates her experience into language, a "reflection" which is portable and lasting, but which is also necessarily partial. Words allow Clara to draw a

“moral” of sorts from her epiphany, but divest it of much of its emotional and spiritual resonance. Perception, on the other hand, is fleeting and uncontrollable, but can allow one to experience truths that the brain obscures. Clara, in her unguarded awe, has received an intimation from Earth that Vernon is the man she ought to marry

O’Hara and Williams also overlook the fact that Vernon, too, recognizes Clara as his ideal mate when she discovers him under the cherry tree. Significantly, Vernon also experiences the moment as epiphanic. He too has a numinous experience from which he comes back down to earth; the key difference is that, whereas Clara regrets the intrusion of reason upon her epiphany, Vernon consciously tries to reason his experience away and to shake it off through vigorous walking. Vernon’s resemblance to Meredith at this juncture, with his desire to gain a clear head through exercise, has led some readers to think Meredith sanctions Vernon’s dismissive attitude towards his “vision.”³ The narrator’s tone, however, suggests otherwise:

Looking upward, not quite awakened out of a transient doze, at a fair head circled in dazzling blossom, one may temporize awhile with common sense, and take it for a vision after the after the eyes have regained direction of the mind. Vernon did so until the plastic vision interwound with reality alarmingly. This is the embrace of a Melusine who will soon have the brain if she is encouraged. Slight dalliance with her makes the very diminutive seem big as life. He jumped to his feet, rattled his throat, planted firmness on his brows and mouth, and attacked the dream-giving earth with tremendous long strides, that his blood might be lively at the throne of understanding. Miss Middleton and young Crossjay were within hail: it was her face he had seen, and still the idea of a vision, chased from his reasonable wits, knocked hard and again for readmission⁴ . . . Man or maid sleeping in the open air provokes your tip-toe curiosity. Men, it is known have in that state cruelly been kissed . . . But a vision is not so distracting . . . [A vision] is the golden key of all

³Stewart, for example, suggests that a desire to prolong heightened emotional states is a symptom of sentimentalism, and that Meredith “severely limits the value of [Clara’s] ‘intoxication’” (433) so that she, and the readers, will not place too much emphasis on emotional transport.

⁴Meredith uses the locked door as a symbol for the subconscious several times over the course of the novel. He writes, for instance, that “all the doors are not open in a young lady’s consciousness, quick of nature though she may be: some are locked and keyless, some will not open to the key, some are defended by ghosts inside” (228).

the possible: new worlds expand beneath the dawn it brings us. Just outside reality, it illumines, enriches, and softens real things; -- and to desire it in preference to the simple fact, is a damning proof of enervation.

Such was Vernon's winding up of his brief drama of fantasy. He was aware of the fantastical element in him and soon had it under. (96)

Vernon has had an intimation that Clara is the proper mate for him. This intimation arises from a source both super- and sub-rational: the "dream-giving earth" Vernon so derides. It comes from Earth, the Meredithian life-force, and from the "earth" that is Vernon's own body, as evidenced by his thoughts of being kissed and embraced by a Melusine. Vernon does not trust either type of "earth," and comically attempts to stomp the vision away, screwing his face into a parody of determination. Hardly the patriarchal know-it-all he has sometimes been accused of being, Vernon appears bewildered and amusingly moralistic ("to desire [a vision] in preference to the simple fact, is a damning proof of enervation") in his attempts to deny his attraction to Clara. He, too, is prey for the Comic Spirit.

The full import of the cherry tree scene is only evident to the reader, not to the principals themselves. Careful attention to the symbolic resonance of the scene reveals what Clara and Vernon briefly glimpse and then deny: that they ought to marry. O'Hara is certainly right to attach archetypal significance to the scene, but she focuses only on Clara's interpretation of her experience. Clara pays attention (at least consciously) only to the virginal whiteness of the blossoms, but, on the narrative level, the dominant mythic reference is to Cupid and Psyche.⁵ Meredith takes special care to describe the postures of Clara and Vernon: Clara quietly sneaks up on the sleeping Vernon, cranes her neck to see

⁵The tree scene also alludes to the tree under which the lovers meet in the Willow Pattern. See Mayo (455-6) and O'Hara (9, 18-19).

what he is reading,⁶ and “immediately, and still with a bent head,” gazes up at the blossoms. After experiencing the tree’s beauty, she looks down to find Vernon “dreamily looking up” at her, and races off in embarrassment. Vernon remembers her as “bending rather low to peep at him asleep” and that “the poise of her slender figure, between an air of spying and of listening, vividly recalled his likening of her to the Mountain Echo” (96). Clara’s posture of bending over the sleeping Vernon, coupled with the fact that she and Vernon later marry, recalls the scene of recognition in which Psyche discovers Cupid is her husband.

In the cherry tree scene, as in *The Egoist* as a whole, Meredith validates the non-rational parts of the psyche, such as emotion, sense perception, and spiritual intimation. He also affirms the mobile nature of the psyche, which he symbolically links to ever-changing nature and society. For Meredith, flux, not stasis, is the master principle of the life force he terms Earth.⁷

Clara, despite her keen intelligence and her command of language, is the character in *The Egoist* most associated with flux and the non-rational. Her “volatility” is of great concern to herself and others, not least because it is the quality characters in the novel most align with femininity. As in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, characters in *The Egoist* project their anxieties about irrationality and mutability onto women. When Clara changes her mind about marrying Willoughby, she arouses these anxieties, and they react with disbelief, shock, and anger. Clara herself, who is all too aware of the negative

⁶ This fact is also surely significant, as reading is the dominant metaphor for gaining knowledge of others throughout Meredith’s oeuvre. Clara is attempting to gain some insight into Vernon’s character by seeing what he is reading.

⁷ See Hudson 461-8 and Smith 54.

stereotypes surrounding “fickle” women, comes to doubt her own psychic stability. But Clara, Meredith suggests, needs to learn to trust the more “volatile” parts of her personality, which lead her to truths her reason would obscure.

Too much adherence to reason and stasis, Meredith implies, can make one morally and psychologically unhealthy. The chief example of this phenomenon is, of course, Willoughby. In life, Willoughby aspires to the static condition of art. His image before the world is carefully polished and almost seamless, and he attempts to hand-pick the audience for his “performances” as well. As Stewart shows, he turns Patterne Hall into a self-enclosed idyll that draws upon the anachronistic trope of the “country house,” complete with manicured grounds, dependent vassals, library, laboratory, and scholar- (Vernon) and poet-in-residence (Laetitia) (420-37). Willoughby views his prospective bride, too, as an *objet d’art*: “To flatter Sir Willoughby,” the narrator observes,

it was the fashion to exalt her as one of the types of beauty: the one providentially selected to set off his masculine type. . . . Lady Busshe was reminded of the favourite lineaments of the women of Leonard, the angels of Luini. Lady Culmer had seen crayon sketches of demoiselles of the French aristocracy resembling her. (TE 36-7)⁸

Willoughby imagines that “[s]he completed him, added the softer lines wanting to his portrait before the world” (37).

Willoughby’s thought and language also work in terms of absolutes. As Craig points out, his language is constative: he holds language to be “purely referential, reflecting an objective, pre-linguistic realm” (899). He uses language in this way to create an illusion of stability, a “secure and self-reflecting linguistic world” around himself (913).

Willoughby imagines he can be like the God of Genesis, existing out of time and making a thing so simply by speaking it. Hence a person who offends him is “extinct,” and shut

⁸See also Calder 476.

out of his house and thoughts insofar as he is able to do so; after Constantia jilts him, he says, “Durham? . . . There is no Miss Durham, to my knowledge” (*TE* 20). Clara’s promise to marry him he views as tantamount to marriage, and valid even beyond death. Willoughby’s belief in the stability of words is perhaps best epitomized by his declaration to Dr. Middleton that

I abhor a breach of faith. A broken pledge is hateful to me. I should regard it as a form of suicide. There are principles which civilized men must contend for. Our social fabric is based on them. As my word stands for me, I hold others to theirs. If that is not done, the world is more or less a carnival of counterfeits. (341-2)

Words, to Willoughby, have value almost exceeding that of the people who utter them. He sets up a false dichotomy which condemns people to either rigidly speaking the truth or ruining their value altogether (“counterfeits,” suicides) by the smallest deviation from the truth. Willoughby holds everyone to the standard of the courtroom or the contract. In doing so, though, he disavows the aspects of life which partake of ambiguity and multiple interpretations—love, emotion, and relationships among them.

Lofty as Willoughby’s principles sound, he himself does not always adhere to them. A person’s “word” is his absolute and permanent word only insofar as it benefits Willoughby. Clara, for example, tries to speak his language at one point by making an oath of her own:

She broke from the inconsequent meaningless mild tone of irony, and said: “Willoughby, women have their honour to swear by equally with men: -- girls have: they have to swear an oath at the altar: may I to you now? Take it for uttered when I tell you that nothing would make me happier than your union with Miss Dale. I have spoken as much as I can. Tell me you release me.” (108)

Willoughby only replies, “[w]ith the well-known screw-smile of duty upholding weariness worn to inanition,”

“Allow me once more to reiterate, that it is repulsive, inconceivable, that I should *ever, under any mortal conditions, bring myself to the point of taking Miss Dale for my wife.* You reduce me to this perfectly childish protestation—pitifully childish!” (108, emphasis Willoughby’s)

Clara cannily reminds Willoughby of the oath he insists she cleave to—her wedding vow—and uses it to prove that women, too, can have “honour” and the responsibility to keep to their word. But, even though Clara is using the frame of discourse he has already established, Willoughby merely dismisses her claim. He ignores her request to be “released” and focuses only on her championing of Laetitia, his emphatic tone revealing his impatience with Clara’s “pointless” challenge to a fact already fixed in his mind. “Oaths,” clearly, are valid to him only when they are to his benefit.

Furthermore, Willoughby’s “word” is weakened by his habit of treating many of his desires, no matter how emotion-driven or how transient, as if they hold the validity of oaths. For example, when he says, aloud to himself, “I swear it, I will never yield [Clara] to Horace DeCraye!,” the narrator notes, “He had spoken it, and it was an oath upon the record” (313). When he asks Laetitia to wait for him upon his return from Italy, she intuits his desire for consistency: “It was as if he required an oath of her when he said: ‘. . . I shall never see a day in Italy to compare with the day of my return to England, or know a pleasure so exquisite as your welcome to me! Will you be so true to that?’” (31).⁹ Despite her animadversions, he goes on to assert, “You would keep [the day] if you promised, and freeze at your post” (31).

⁹Laetitia replies, with a dry wit that is utterly lost on Willoughby, “I am afraid I cannot undertake to make it an appointment, Sir Willoughby” (31). Similarly, when Willoughby asks Clara not to marry again should he die, she asks, “Is it not possible that I may be the first to die?” (43). These interventions by the Comic Spirit help the reader to see Willoughby’s requests as patently absurd, though unfortunately they do nothing for the lord himself.

Willoughby's desperate attempts to make his desires serve as law for others appalls them, once they have seen through him. It is this precise facet of his character that first makes him repugnant to Clara. He commits the atrocity of using his mother's death as a way of bringing up the subject of whether or not Clara will marry again should he die. He requests that she remain unmarried after his (potential, future) death, clearly, only as a way of quelling the gossip of hypothetical observers ("If you knew their talk of widows!") (43) and of keeping Clara his and his only ("You would be surrounded; men are brutes; the scent of unfaithfulness excites them, overjoys them. And I helpless! The thought is maddening.") (43). Willoughby, in his sublime self-absorption, does not see that he has violated a cardinal taboo. He has exposed the kind of selfish thoughts that most people keep to themselves; what is more, he expects Clara to cater to them.

"Why does he not paint himself in brighter colours to me?" she wonders afterward. "Has he no ideal of generosity and chivalry?" (91). The answer, she realizes, is that she is female and shortly to become Willoughby's dependent. "You do not speak to others of the elements in you," she challenges him, and he replies, "I certainly do not: I have only one bride" (91). Clara then understands that "she was expected to worship him and uphold him for whatsoever he might be, without any estimation of qualities: as indeed love does, or young love does: as she perhaps did once, before he chilled her senses" (91). Willoughby, as Clara realizes, views women less as individuals than as static signs (as Laetitia observes, for him "the generic woman appears to have an extraordinary faculty for swallowing the individual") (114), creatures who, by virtue of their gender, will meet his confessions with unconditional love. His culture backs him up in this preconception: conduct books like Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Wives of England*, for example,

told women it was their duty to bolster their husbands' egos, no matter how badly they may behave:

man's dignity, as well as his comfort, must be ministered unto. . . . he ought not to be required to bear the least infringement upon his dignity as a man, and a husband. . . . It is unquestionably the inalienable right of all men, whether ill or well, rich or poor, wise or foolish, to be treated with deference, and made much of in their own houses . . . as no man becomes a fool, or loses his senses by marriage, the woman who has selected such a companion must abide by the consequences; and even he, whatever may be his degree of folly, is entitled to respect from her, because she has voluntarily placed herself in such a position that she must necessarily be his inferior. (28)

But unconditional acceptance, as Meredith wants the reader to see, can do positive harm to a man's character. In this, he seems to be drawing directly upon *The Subjection of Women*. Mill contends that marriages in which husbands have legal power over their wives leads to the precise kind of moral failings Meredith describes in Sir Willoughby.

He writes:

The relation of superiors to dependents is the nursery of these vices of character, which, wherever else they exist, are an overflowing from that source. . . . [a family is often] a school of willfulness, overbearingness, unbounded self-indulgence, and a double-dyed and idealized selfishness, of which sacrifice itself is only a particular form: the care for the wife and children being only care for them as parts of the man's own interests and belongings, and their individual happiness being immolated in every shape to his smallest preferences. . . . [T]he almost unlimited power which present social institutions give to the man over at least one human being . . . seeks out and evokes the latent germs of selfishness in the remotest corners of his nature – fans its faintest sparks and smouldering embers – offers to him a license for the indulgence of those points of his original character which in all other relations he would have found it necessary to repress and conceal, and the repression of which would in time have become a second nature. (172)

Mill and Meredith both make the intriguing argument that morality and character are largely performative. They both view egoism as a part of human nature, one's inborn "original character," that cannot be eradicated, only "repressed and concealed". Such concealment, at first glance, seems to smack of hypocrisy, or, at the very least, of inauthenticity. But, Meredith and Mill believe, repressing one's egoism is a necessary,

moral, and beneficial act. In the first place, it prevents one from making egoistic demands on others, if only for the sake of appearances. Those who repress their egoism become less selfish in deed, if not in thought. Second, with repeated practice, repression becomes “second nature.” One acquires an improved character that, while less “authentic” than the original one, is of more benefit to society and to the human race.

To improve one’s character, then, one must have reverence for the others who serve as one’s “audience.” (Clara and Vernon experience something of this reverence during the cherry tree scene: a sense of each other as worthy, sovereign individuals.) One must also choose to surround one’s self with others who will hold one to a high standard of behavior. Clara seems to have an intuitive grasp of this principle. Her response to Willoughby’s outrageous demands is not that he should stop being an egoist, but that she wishes he would “paint himself in brighter colours to [her].” She senses that he lacks the respect for her as an equal that would compel him to act like a moral person before her.

Mill’s description of the ideal marriage is in keeping with his beliefs about the value of social acting for an audience one deeply respects:

What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them—so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development—I will not attempt to describe. . . . But I maintain, with the profoundest conviction, that this, and this only, is the ideal of marriage; and that all opinions, customs, and institutions which favour any other notion of it . . . are relics of primitive barbarism. The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence . . . when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation.
(237)

This, as I shall later attempt to prove, is the kind of marriage Clara and Vernon will have.

For Meredith, social acting itself is not morally problematic. It is the role one chooses to play and the ends for which one acts that matter. Willoughby's problem is that his acting is all done in order to shield his vulnerable self. Meredith represents Willoughby's psyche as highly compartmentalized:

Within the shadow of his presence he compressed opinion, as a strong frost binds the springs of earth, but beyond it his shivering sensitiveness ran about in dread of a stripping in a wintry atmosphere. This was the ground of his hatred of the world: it was an appalling fear on behalf of his naked eidolon, the tender infant Self swaddled in his name before the world, for which he felt as the most highly civilized of men alone can feel, and which it was impossible for him to stretch out hands to protect. There the poor little loveable creature ran for any mouth to blow on; and frost-nipped and bruised, it cried to him, and he was of no avail! Must we not detest a world that so treats us? We loathe it the more, by the measure of our contempt for them, when we have made the people within the shadow-circle of our person slavish . . . (236)

In Willoughby's personal psychic myth, he casts himself as defender of his "tender infant Self" against a cold and unfeeling world. Tellingly, he views his inmost core, something akin to the id,¹⁰ as a "poor little loveable" infant to be coddled, rather than a chthonic force to be tempered. He views the "eidolon" as his true self, which he cannot reveal to the world for fear of its being damaged; he chooses to view its demands as being totally justified, and finds fault with the "world" whenever these demands are thwarted.¹¹

Willoughby's outward, social self acts entirely as a defense mechanism for this eidolon, while his consciousness anticipates the eidolon's needs and manipulates his social self accordingly. As a result, he becomes detached from his social self to a remarkable degree. After Clara asks to be released from her engagement, for example, he

¹⁰ Kelvin observes that "egoism as Meredith uses it is closer to what Freud designated by the term 'id'" (116). See also Wilt 160-63.

¹¹ As Roberts writes, "'self-knowledge' with Willoughby takes the form of an awareness of potential accusing *others* against whom he needs to defend himself" (163).

goes to talk with one of his chief admirers, Mrs. Mountstuart-Jenkinson, for reassurance that he is still esteemed:

[T]he refreshment of the talk he had sustained, not without point, assisted him to distinguish in its complete abhorrent orb the offense committed against him by his bride. And this he did through projecting it more and more away from him, so that in the outer distance it involved his personal emotions less, while observation was enabled to encompass its vastness, and, as it were, perceive the whole spherical mass of the wretched girl's guilt impudently turning on its axis.

Thus to detach an injury done to us, and plant it in space, for mathematical measurement of its weight and bulk, is an art; it may also be an instinct of self-preservation . . . the accidental blossoming of his ideal [of himself], with Mrs. Mountstuart, on the very heels of Clara's offense, restored him to full command of his art of detachment, and he thrust her out, quite apart from himself, to contemplate her disgraceful revolutions. (135-36)

Deliberating on the incident with a remarkable lack of emotion, as though he is a judge in a court of law, Willoughby decides that Clara has committed a crime against his social self and must be punished. With Machiavellian detachment, he determines the best course to take against her: "if he retained a hold on her, he could undoubtedly apply the scourge at leisure; any kind of scourge; he could shun her, look on her frigidly, unbend to her to find a warmer place for sarcasm, pityingly smile, ridicule, pay court elsewhere" (185). Emotions that pertain only to Willoughby's social self mean little more than the words for those emotions. They become counters in a game for him to manipulate at will.

At times, Willoughby does become aware of the utter disconnect between his social self and his inner life:

With all these nice calculations at work, W. stood above himself, contemplating his active machinery, which he could partly criticize but could not stop, in a singular wonderment at the aims and schemes and tremours of one who was handsome, manly, acceptable in the world's eyes: and had he not loved himself most heartily he would have been divided to the extent of repudiating that urgent and excited half of his being, whose motions appeared as those of a body of insects perpetually erecting and repairing a structure of extraordinary pettiness. He loved himself too seriously to dwell on the division for more than a minute or so. (288)

Willoughby shut himself up in his laboratory to brood awhile after the conflict. Sounding through himself, as it was habitual for him to do, for the plan most agreeable to his taste, he came on a strange discovery among the lower circles of that microcosm.¹² He was no longer guided in his choice by liking and appetite: he had to put it on the edge of a sharp discrimination and try it by his acutest judgment before it was acceptable to his heart . . . The mysteries of his own bosom were bare to him; but he could comprehend them only in their immediate relation to the world outside. This hateful world had caught him and turned him into a machine. (399)

It is surely no coincidence that these ruminations take place in his laboratory. Willoughby is scientific, or, rather, pseudo-scientific, in his approach to matters involving his social self. He psychically borrows some of the great respect his culture affords science, and uses it as justification for his treatment of others.¹³ Here again Meredith's anxieties about science come to the surface. The scientific mindset, he cautions, if unalloyed by love, emotion, sympathy with others, and other non-rational facets of life, can promote materialism. Materialism, in turn, can be used as a justification for egoism. In Willoughby's case, materialism is merely a means of "self-defense," armor for his eidolon, but he still is unable to break out of it ("his active machinery . . . which he could partly criticize but could not stop"). It has become, in Mill's term, "second nature."

Willoughby has cut himself off from certain parts of his psyche almost entirely. Everything has to be carefully filtered through his consciousness, here ironically called his "heart," before he can allow himself to feel or express it. The tragedy is that Willoughby is still aware of certain feelings—sexual attraction, for example, or pure anger—but refuses to let himself engage them.¹⁴ They hover on the border of his

¹²The allusion to Dante's *Inferno* is surely not accidental.

¹³ Time and again, Willoughby argues to himself that he is choosing the healthy and beautiful Clara as a bride to ensure the genetic superiority of his offspring. See also Hudson and Smith.

¹⁴ Baker finds Willoughby overly-squeamish about sexuality, at least on the surface, but secretly drawn to the idea of deflowering a virgin (695-99). "Willoughby," he writes, "is incapable of a normal sexual and

consciousness and torment him, as his attraction for Clara does when he considers “giving” her to Vernon: “There was his vengeance. It melted him, she was so sweet! She shone for him like the sunny breeze on water. Thinking of her caused a catch of his breath. The dreadful young woman had a keener edge for the senses of men than sovereign beauty. It would be madness to let her go” (186). As Wilt writes, “where blood should be, warmth and strength of feeling to feed both shivering self and busily quivering brain, Willoughby has only a frantic, galvanic charge of action” (161). Such “blood”, Meredith implies, could save Willoughby from being transmuted into a “machine”; sadly, he disregards it, denying his own happiness in the process.

Willoughby’s psyche stands in sharp contrast to Clara’s. Though she is highly intelligent, Clara is still the character in the novel most associated with flux and the non-rational. Her thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and subconscious drives intermingle with one another, so that she finds it hard to determine what source her desires emerge from and whether or not she can trust them. As a result, she sometimes struggles to verbalize what is going on inside her, and other characters view her as flighty and inarticulate. She herself, thinking back on her change of heart about her engagement, wonders, “Was one so volatile as she a person with a will? – Were they not a multitude of flitting wishes that she took for a will?” (166). In fact, Clara’s personality seems to exist in such a state of flux that several critics have wondered if she can be said to have a “character” at all. J. Hills Miller, for example, writes that, in *The Egoist*, “the self is revealed to be not something fixed but a multitude of fleeting wishes, feelings, thoughts”

emotional attachment, going back and forth between a lubricious interest in female chastity and an even more debilitating self-love” (701).

(114). Clara, he asserts, “exists, in herself, not as a substantial character, but as a sequence of figures, fleeting, evanescent, each succeeded by another that cancels it, as an image of fire cancels one of water . . . and so on” (114). Smirlock likewise claims that in

The Egoist

meaningful individual action derives not from a stable self, but rather from what [Gabriel] Marcel refers to as inexhaustible fullness of being, a vital energy rather than a circumscribed ‘character’ . . . It is this energy that Clara Middleton possesses in abundance, that makes her unpleasantly volatile to her father and Willoughby, and frees her from the static confines of ‘personality.’ (322)

Meredith certainly does not see the self as monolithic, and he does give his characters the freedom to change and to be inconsistent. He also allows readers access to the more fluid portions of his characters’ psyches, a technique which can make them seem impulsive and unpredictable. However, I believe Meredith would stop short of saying his characters lack stability or selfhood altogether. I wish to argue that, while parts of Clara’s psyche are in constant flux, she, as an individual, is not as “volatile” as she and those around her take her to be. Also, I believe, the critics make the mistake of assuming that Clara, because her psyche is “center stage,” so to speak, is representative of Meredith’s views on selfhood.

First of all, Meredith states that not everyone is as “volatile” as Clara. Her changeability is partly attributable to her youth, and partly to her temperament. As the narrator notes several times, Clara has a “quick” nature or temperament.¹⁵ Her “nature” enables her to be calm after a long night of debating whether or not to leave Patterne Hall; as the narrator observes,

She had gone through her crisis in the anticipation of it. That is how quick natures will often be cold and hard, or not much moved, when the positive crisis arrives,

¹⁵See pages 169, 204, and 223, for example.

and why it is that they are prepared for astonishing leaps over the gradations which should render their conduct comprehensible to us, if not excusable. (169)

Other characters, with “slower” natures, have trouble understanding Clara and dismiss her as fickle and flighty. Dr. Middleton, who has perhaps the “slowest” temperament in the novel, is particularly flummoxed by his daughter. Her “enthusiastic, imaginative, impulsive” nature is antithetical to his “repose,” and he feels that is “not tied to perfect sanity” while she remains unmarried and under his care (156). Dr. Middleton’s slow, ponderous speech is in direct contrast to Clara’s, which is filled with dashes, ellipses, and changes of thought midstream. Yet Clara is not “decentered” while Dr. Middleton is “centered”; the two merely think and perceive at different paces.

Clara’s youth also contributes to her “quick nature.” “The tempers of the young are liquid fires in isles of quicksand,” the narrator says at one point, “the precious metals not yet cooled in a solid earth. [Clara’s] needs were her nature, her moods her mind” (102). Elsewhere, he repeats the point: “Sweeping from sensation to sensation, the young, whom sensations impel and distract, can rarely date their disturbance from a particular one; unless it be some great villain injury that has been done” (52). Young people, Meredith implies, feel “sensations” so strongly that their other faculties become overwhelmed by them, and they are not always able to think them through. Clara, after all, is only nineteen. The more mature characters in the novel, like Vernon and Laetitia, have grown into more stable temperaments, so that they are not so buffeted about by their sensations. They counsel Clara to examine herself carefully and with patience—to wait out her “sensations” and to sort them out when they are not so pressing. When Clara asks Vernon to help her break her engagement, for example,

He proposed to help her with advice only. She was to do everything for herself, do and dare everything, decide upon everything. He told her flatly that so would she learn to know her own mind; and flatly that it was her penance. . . . He talked of patience, of self-examination and patience. (168)

Meredith likewise suggests that only through patience can one access the truth. Of

Mrs. Mountstuart, a crafty character who is always “reading” others, he writes,

Mrs. Mountstuart’s calculations . . . were like her suspicion, coarse and broad, not absolutely incorrect, but not of an exact measure with the truth. That pin’s head of the truth is rarely hit by design. The search after it of the professionally penetrative in the dark of a bosom may bring it forth by the heavy knocking all about the neighbourhood that we call good guessing, but it does not come out clean; other matter adheres to it; and being more it is less than truth. The unadulterated is to be had only by faith in it or by waiting for it. (296)

Here, Meredith makes the startling conclusion that one cannot reason one’s way to the truth. The truth, in fact, may be like the “happiness” Clara experiences under the cherry tree, coming to one fleeting and unbidden and disappearing if one “knocks about” too much or “ravages every corner” (95) of one’s mind searching for it. One must, instead, wait for truth to work its way out of the morass of thoughts and self-evasions that disguise it. Truth bubbles up, as it were, from the subconscious when the brain is quiet or distracted. Being too impatient, like Clara and Mrs. Mountstuart, or too controlled, like Willoughby, can impede one’s access to the truth.

Meredith also suggests that Clara’s psyche, in its seeming “instability,” is more akin to reality than, say, Willoughby’s static, compartmentalized one. Throughout the novel, he uses metaphors of flowing water to capture the mobile state of society, human evolution, perception, and the psyche. Society is in a constant state of flux, either progressing or regressing.¹⁶ Our perceptions are likewise in flux: our senses are constantly bombarded

¹⁶Conversation also serves as an important kind of “flux” in the novel. In a fascinating article, Handwerk argues that, for Meredith, character is dependent on “the ebb and flow of relationships” (165) and especially on dialogue. Clara learns about herself and her attraction to Vernon through dialogue with

with phenomena which it is up to us to interpret. The psyche, too, never remains the same for a moment. When Clara is just beginning to discover the extent of Willoughby's egoism, for example, Meredith gives us this description of her mind: "She walked back at a slow pace, and sang to herself above her darker-flowing thoughts, like the reed-warbler on the branch beside the night-stream; a simple song of a light-hearted sound, independent of the shifting black and grey of the flood underneath" (60). Later, when she asks Vernon, "What is it we are at the mercy of?", he replies, "*Currents* of feeling, our natures" (99, emphasis mine). His description of the "world" likewise could easily apply to the psyche: "One might as well have an evil opinion of a river: here it's muddy, there it's clear; one day troubled, another at rest. We have to treat it with common sense" (62).

Clara does, however, have trouble accepting her emotions and bodily sensations as valid as her thoughts. Her psyche first alerts her to the fact that Willoughby is wrong for her by giving her a mental image of being buried alive:

To be fixed at the mouth of a mine, and to have to descend it daily, and not to discover great opulence below; on the contrary, to be chilled in subterranean sunlessness, without any substantial quality that she could grasp, only the mystery of inefficient tallow-light in those caverns of the complacent talking man: this appeared to her too extreme a probation for two or three weeks. How a lifetime of it! (48)¹⁷

When Willoughby then tries to get her alone in order to embrace her, she experiences bodily fear:

[Willoughby] whispered, "Come." In the hurry of the moment she did not examine a lightning terror that shot through her. It passed, and was no more than the shadow which bends the summer grasses, leaving a ruffle of her ideas, in wonder of her

Laetitia and Mrs. Mountstuart (183-4). Clara's perception of Willoughby "freezes," Handwerk adds, when she labels him an egoist and comes to treat him as a monolithic power to escape from (174-9). See also Craig 908-9.

¹⁷Baker reads the multiple images of mines, caves, and dungeons in the novel as symbols of the id (700). Here, though, Clara seems to be envisioning the claustrophobia that marriage to Willoughby will engender.

having feared herself for something. Her father was with them. She and Willoughby were not yet alone. [. . .]
 She was led to think that Willoughby had drawn [the two of] them to the library with the design to be rid of her protector, and she began to fear him. . . . She grasped young Crossjay's hand. [. . .]
 "Off!" [Willoughby] said, and the boy had to run.
 Clara saw herself without a shield. (49)

The non-rational parts of Clara's psyche sense the threat that Willoughby poses before her brain does, and attempt to protect her by sending her signals of fear and sexual revulsion.¹⁸ Clara comes to view Willoughby as a predator she must "shield" herself against. Her mental images of him are tinged with Gothic horror. As O'Hara also points out, Meredith alludes to the myth of Hades and Persephone here.¹⁹ Clara, on some archetypal level, senses Willoughby is a Hades who will, if she is not careful, capture her and sweep her "underground" (O'Hara 15-16).²⁰

These images and sensations, though, seem so irrational, metaphorical, fleeting, and out of proportion to the situation that Clara does not take them seriously. In fact, she tries to reason them away. Just before Willoughby embraces her, she mentally cries out, "Why would he not wait to deserve her! – no, not deserve – to reconcile her with her real position; not reconcile, but to repair the image of him in her mind, before he claimed his apparent right!" (49-50). After the embrace, she tries to convince herself that it was not so bad:

She came out of it with the sensations of the frightened child that has had its dip in sea-water, sharpened to think that after all it was not so severe a trial. Such was her idea; and she said to herself immediately: What am I that I should complain? [. . .]

¹⁸Her unwillingness to be touched by this improper mate may be an evolutionary signal.

¹⁹Clara, who has been trained in Greek and Latin by her father, is surely aware of this myth on a conscious level as well.

²⁰Roberts likens *The Egoist* to a "drawing-room" version of *Pamela* (151).

She was horrified to think how far she had drawn away from him, and now placed her hand on his arm to appease her self-accusations and propitiate duty. He spoke as she had wished; his manner was what she had wished; she was his bride, almost his wife; her conduct was a kind of madness; she could not understand it.

Good sense and duty counselled her to control her wayward spirit. (50-1)

Here, Clara disavows her original sensations and thoughts in favor of being “dutiful” to Willoughby. She assumes that she was the one in the wrong, and interprets her feelings of fear and revulsion as a “kind of madness” and as manifestations of a “wayward spirit” she must control. Clara also revises her original, most honest thought, that Willoughby does not deserve her, to read that there is something wrong with her “image of him.”

Clara’s mental maneuverings suggest that she has been socialized to be dutiful and deferential to men.²¹ She may very well be hearing her father’s voice in the back of her head, as Dr. Middleton believes women are flighty and unstable creatures: “Why should [Clara] wish to run away from Patterne Hall for a single hour?,” he asks himself at one point, and replies: “Simply because she was of the sex born mutable and explosive. A husband was her proper custodian, justly relieving a father” (156). When Clara tells him, in all sober seriousness, that she wants to break her engagement, he becomes angry and discombobulated, hurling one misogynistic epithet after another at her:

“Chatter! chatter!”

“Lunacy!”

“Have you gone back to your cradle, Clara Middleton?”

“I verily believe we are asking the girl to dissect a caprice. . . . At a particular age they traffic in whims, which are, I presume, the spiritual of hysterics.”

“It is the cry of an animal! . . . You feel like one? Your behaviour is of that shape.”

²¹Beer writes that “the forms of civilization . . . may prevent a woman like Clara from responding in her own full identity because they present her with a model of what a lady should feel and be—a model which is static and anti-evolutionary” (491). See also Brown 110-4.

“Are you quicksands [*sic*], Clara Middleton, that nothing can be built on you?”

“Whither is a flighty head and a shifty will carrying the girl?”

“Where is your mind?”

“She has perchance wrestled with her engagement, as the aboriginals of a land newly discovered by a crew of adventurous colonists do battle with the garments imposed on them by our considerate civilization . . .”

“She does not waste time in the mission to procure that astonishing product of a shallow soil, her reasons; if such be the object of her search.” (342-9)²²

The most hurtful insult, to Dr. Middleton, and the one that leaps closest to mind when he is under stress, is to call someone irrational.²³ He likens Clara to all manner of “irrational” beings: children, animals, lunatics, hysterics, and colonized peoples—not coincidentally, all beings women have traditionally been associated with. It is small wonder that Clara distrusts her emotions, given that she was raised by such a man.

Meredith has been criticized for making Dr. Middleton such a clichéd and overbearing misogynist. The reason he does so, I believe, is that he wants to associate Dr. Middleton with the patriarchy itself.²⁴ Dr. Middleton is a scholar well-versed in the Classical tradition, who often uses quotes from Greek and Roman authors as evidence that women are inferior beings. Willoughby wins his approval by giving him free access to Patterne Hall’s fine library and wine cellar. He cements the homosocial bond between himself in the doctor by saying, “Vernon is a claret-man: and so is Horace De Craye. They are both below the mark of this wine. They will join the ladies. Perhaps you and I,

²²In O’Hara’s formulation, “he spits out epithets in an effort to name the enigma and shame her into consistency” (16).

²³See Wilt 152-3.

²⁴See also Roberts 170-1.

sir, might remain together” (159).²⁵ And Dr. Middleton all but literally trades his daughter for such pleasures, assuring Willoughby of her virginity and saying, when presented with more wine, “I have but a girl to give!” (161). When he leaves the wine cellar, the baronet becomes “son Willoughby” (164).

Not surprisingly, then, Dr. Middleton is the “tribunal” Clara “most dreads” (341) facing when she decides she cannot marry Willoughby. The doctor is, in his way, as rigid and hyperrational in his thinking as the baronet. When Clara tells him, in front of Willoughby, that she must break her engagement, he uses particularly masculine forms of discourse in order to silence her.²⁶ He likens the proceedings to a “sermon” (339) and a “dissection” (343), but the dominant semantic field he uses is that of the court of law. Acting as a judge, he terms Clara’s desire to end her engagement a “breach of faith” and demands that she supply him with rational reasons for her “bad conduct.” If she cannot come up with reasons that satisfy him, then he will levy his sentence upon her:

I have her, sir, if you will favour me by continuing in abeyance.—You will come within an hour voluntarily, Clara: and you will either at once yield your hand to him, or you will furnish reasons, and they must be good ones, for withholding it. . . . Mind, I say *reasons*. . . . If you have none that are to my satisfaction, you implicitly, and instantly, and cordially obey my command. (348)

Willoughby, cannily sensing Dr. Middleton’s cast of mind, also uses the language of the courtroom: “I fear, sir, I am a poor forensic orator . . . Judicially, I am bold to say, though it may appear a presumption in one suffering acutely, I abhor a breach of faith” (342). To Clara, though, he speaks in a patently false, sentimentalized love-language, which

²⁵See Calder 477-8.

²⁶According to Roberts, men in the novel frequently use their command of language to control others. Willoughby, he observes, is a “monologist, in the sense that his word is designed to repel or divert the world of the other . . . again and again we see him evading the word of his interlocutor, or even appearing not to hear it” (160).

belittles her in front of her father: "Lose you, my love? It would be to strip myself of every blessing of body and soul. It would be to deny myself possession of grace, beauty, wit, all the incomparable charms of loveliness of mind and person in woman, and plant myself in a desert" (344).²⁷

Clara finds it impossible to respond to such language, not least because her "reasons" for rejecting Willoughby are too "irrational" to be acceptable to such a "court":

What could she say? he is an Egoist? The epithet has no meaning in such a scene. *Invent!* shrieked the hundred-voiced instinct of dislike within her. . . . She dramatized [each man] springing forward by turns, with crushing rejoinders. The activity of her mind reveled in giving them a tongue, but would not do it for herself. Then ensued the inevitable consequence of an incapacity to speak at the heart's urgent dictate: heart and mind became divided. One throbbed hotly, the other hung aloof, and mentally, while the sick inarticulate heart kept clamouring, she answered it with all that she imagined for these two men to say. . . . And thus beating down her heart, she completed the mischief with a piercing view of the foundation of her father's advocacy of Willoughby, and more lamentable asked herself what her value was, if she stood bereft of respect for her father. [. . .] she clung to her respect for him, and felt herself drowning with it: and she echoed Willoughby consciously, doubling her horror with the consciousness, in crying out on a world where the most sacred feelings are subject to such lapses. (345)

Not being able to articulate what is in her heart in words her father will accept, Clara is paralyzed. Her internalizations of her father's and Willoughby's views of women, more than anything the two men actually say, keep her from speaking out. Meredith thus

²⁷Roberts (borrowing from Laetitia) names this speech genre "fluting" (162-3). Clara and Laetitia both recognize this tenor of speech as false: "to [Laetitia's] hearing it was hardly in the tone of manliness that he entreated her to reassure him; he womanized his language" (*TE* 31); "Speech so foreign to [Clara's] ears, unnatural in tone, unmanlike even for a lover (who is allowed a softer dialect), set her vainly sounding for the source and drift of it" (45). Clara wishes Willoughby would speak to her as he does to men, so that she can be honest with him: "But do, do talk to me as you talk to the world, Willoughby; give me some relief!" (76). Vernon, significantly, cannot speak the "lady's tongue."

As Craig points out, women in the novel also find it difficult to speak the truth due to the "feminine" type of language they are expected to use (903). As Clara tells Laetitia, "very few women are able to be straightforwardly sincere in their speech" (190). In his intriguing essay, Craig goes on to posit that only rarely do the characters engage in "real talk": creative, genuine dialogue that reveals truths to both parties (906-8). Craig's concept of "real talk" has much in common with Mill's description of the ideal marriage.

illustrates the ways in which misogyny can work inside a woman's very psyche to make her "beat down her heart."

Clara does go away from the "trial" with one piece of wisdom, however: she recognizes that her father is as much an egoist as Willoughby. She loses some respect for him—and promptly berates herself for it—but, perhaps, he will seem like less of a "tribunal" to her in the future.

Fortunately, Clara does learn to listen to the inner voice of her "heart," and it prompts her to marry a man who is well-suited to her. Clara's marriage to Vernon Whitford, however, has long been a source of contention among critics, many of whom feel that Meredith undermined his feminist principles by marrying his heroine off.²⁸ Kate Millett, for example, writes that "[t]hroughout the novel [Clara] was a person in the process of *becoming*, but by the last page she has not succeeded in becoming anyone but Mrs. Vernon Whitford, which is to say, no one at all" (139). Carolyn Williams argues that Meredith turns Clara into a reward for Vernon for being more evolved than Willoughby. "It seems," she writes,

that we have read of Clara's self-education, her process of learning to read, as a way of seeing why and how Vernon Whitford triumphs in love, even though he is shy and scholarly, and poor, and bruised terribly by a bad first marriage—very much like George Meredith himself. (64)

Other critics find the ending unsatisfactory purely on aesthetic grounds. Adams claims that Meredith "had to use the symbol of marriage, if not much of the actuality, to top off his fable; but the institution as such did not answer very well to the ends he asked it to serve" (554). Wilt sees Vernon as "astonishingly dry" (155), while to Beer he is "too

²⁸Clara and Vernon do not actually marry by the end of the novel, but Vernon does ask Dr. Middleton for his blessing, and, as the last chapter finds the couple in the Alps accompanied by Dr. Middleton, it is safe to assume they will marry.

integrated to be interesting” (174) and to Adams he is the “caricature of an answer” (560).²⁹

I wish to argue, however, that Clara’s marriage to Vernon is more satisfying, on both aesthetic and feminist grounds, than critics have tended to believe. First of all, Meredith suggests, Clara and Vernon will have the kind of equal, companionate marriage described by Mill in *The Subjection of Women*. This sort of marriage, Mill and Meredith both believed, represented an evolutionary step forward from marriages in which husbands have power over their wives. Clara and Vernon’s marriage is thus not a comic affirmation of the status quo, but a symbol of progressive change. Also, the marriage is what Clara desires and what she instinctively knows will bring her personal fulfillment. A close examination of Clara’s psyche reveals that she recognizes, on a subconscious level, that Vernon has all the qualities she desires in a mate—qualities much like those she herself possesses.

Mill, as mentioned above (see page 16), believed that the best kind of marriage was one in which both partners were equal and possessed of “reciprocal superiority,” so that each could lead the other to higher levels of moral development. Meredith, too, describes the highest type of love as dynamic and improving: “In other words, love is an affair of two, and is only for two that can be as quick, as constant in intercommunication as are sun and earth, through the cloud or face to fact. They take their breath of life from one another in signs of affection, proofs of faithfulness, incentives to admiration” (48). Love,

²⁹See also Calder (477). Neil Roberts strikes a rare dissenting note when he notes that Meredith had no other options than to have Clara marry if he did not want her to remain celibate (181). Miller claims that Clara’s promise to marry Vernon is qualitatively different than her promise to wed Willoughby, as she makes it from a position of free, genuine selfhood (123-34).

in other words, ought to participate in the scheme of flux and progression that is Earth. The stasis or “constancy” Willoughby expects of women is antithetical to such love.

Clara, too, yearns for “intercommunication” with her lover, in words that read like a paraphrase of Mill’s ideal of companionate marriage: “She was feminine indeed, but she wanted comradeship, a living and frank exchange of the best in both, with the deeper feelings untroubled” (48). At times during her engagement to Willoughby, though, she does indulge in a retrograde fantasy in which she longs for a “rescuer,” a knight in shining armor to whisk her away. In the passage during which she makes the famed Freudian slip, replacing Vernon’s name for Harry Oxford’s, she indulges in just this fantasy:

she did not blush in saying to herself, “If someone loved me!” Before hearing of Constantia, she had mused upon liberty as a virgin Goddess, -- men were out of her thoughts. . . . That fair childish maidenliness had ceased. With her body straining in her dragon’s grasp, with the savour of loathing, unable to contend, unable to speak aloud, she began to speak to herself, and all the health of her nature made her outcry womanly, -- “If I were loved!” -- not for the sake of love, but for free breathing. . . . “If some noble gentleman could see me as I am and not disdain to aid me! . . . I could fly bleeding and through hootings to a comrade. Oh! a comrade. I do not want a lover. . . . But I have no Harry Whitford, I am alone. (85)

It is significant that Clara only daydreams of a “rescuer” *after* hearing about Constantia. Much as hearing the word “egoist” helped Clara to classify, and thus rebel against, Willoughby,³⁰ Constantia’s tale has presented Clara with an attractive cultural script to follow. The role of “damsel in distress” appeals to Clara, not because she dreams of romantic love, but because it is easy and known, whereas the role of “jilt” is purely negative.³¹ Moreover, the character of “jilt” leaves Clara with the question of what to do

³⁰Gilmartin notes that the metaphor of sati also helps Clara realize what marriage to Willoughby will mean (155).

³¹This psychic narrative is also perilously close to Willoughby’s self-concept as protector of the eidolon.

after she has rejected Willoughby. Leaving Willoughby, without any second man to cleave to, would place her in a cultural void. She would not know how to “act,” in both senses of the world. Finally, and most importantly, playing the damsel in distress would allow Clara to avoid responsibility for her actions. She could convince herself she was “in love” with her rescuer, an emotion her culture (and ours!) would accept as a valid excuse for leaving Willoughby.

In this passage Meredith also brings up the intriguing possibility that one can repress a desire to be a more moral person. Clara realizes, midway through her daydream, that what she wants is freedom and not love. Her repetition of the word “comrade,” coupled with her Freudian slip on Vernon’s name, suggests that what Clara has buried in her subconscious is a longing for an equal partnership and for greater responsibility.³² Later in the novel, likewise, Clara learns that it is impossible for her to love another with her “deeper feelings untroubled.” Even then, though, her psychic revelation of love is one which Mill would have countenanced:

O to love! was not said by her, but, if she had sung, as her nature prompted, it would have been. Her war with Willoughby sprung of a desire to love repelled by distaste. Her cry for freedom was a cry to be free to love: she discovered it, half-shuddering: to love, oh! no—no shape of man, not impalpable nature either: but to love unselfishness, and helpfulness, and planted strength in something. (169)

This revelation comes during Clara’s “dark night of the soul” in Chapter 21. The words “discovered” and “half-shuddering” suggest that this is a painful revelation that Clara receives unwillingly. She knows that loving “unselfishness and helpfulness, and planted strength in something,” and accepting Vernon as her partner, will require much work and moral vigor on her part. Recognizing this fact, she gives way, from time to time, to the

³²Moments earlier, Clara has associated Vernon in her mind with such responsibility: she complains to herself that he “read her case” and “could help, but moved no hand” (85). Clara knows, however, that she is judging Vernon unfairly and that he will not help her because he wants her to free herself.

human tendency Meredith calls “languor”: a choosing of physical or mental laziness over growth and change. “Langour” is always ready to cloud over one’s instincts towards growth and responsibility, and must be, Meredith stresses, carefully guarded against.

At several key points in the novel, of which this is only one, Clara is able to see through her languor and recognize Vernon as her ideal mate. The most clearly-marked of these moments is the cherry tree scene, but perhaps the most crucial happens during Clara’s temporary flight from Patterne Hall. At the railway station, Vernon enters into a debate with Clara as to whether she should run away. He counsels her to return, saying, “You don’t determine [to be free]; you run away from the difficulty, and leave it to your father and friends to bear” (223). His final words to her, however, are, “I wish you to have your free will” (223).

During the debate, Vernon makes a symbolic gesture that has great meaning to Meredith. He drinks from Clara’s brandy glass, turning it around first so his lips will touch the same side of the glass hers did, stating, “Now we are both pledged in the poison-bowl” (223). Effectively, Vernon turns the glass into the loving cup, a symbol Meredith used in both *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Diana of the Crossways*.³³ This simple gesture is charged with meaning for Clara:

Vernon had asked her whether she was alone. Connecting that inquiry, singular in itself, and singular in his manner of putting it, with the glass of burning liquid, she repeated: “He must have seen Colonel De Craye!” and she stared at the empty glass, as at something that witnessed to something: for Vernon was not your supple cavalier assiduously on the smirk to pin a gallantry to commonplaces. But all the doors are not open in a young lady’s consciousness, quick of nature though she may be . . . She could not have said what the something witnessed to. If we by chance know more, we have still no right to make it more prominent than it was with her. . . . (227-8)

³³In the scene in *Diana* where Emma restores Diana to life and health, Emma feeds Diana from the same spoon she has been using, saying, “We two can feed from one spoon; it is a closer bond than the loving cup.” The loving cup is also drunk from at weddings.

Directly after this thought forms in Clara's mind, she gets in the carriage and asks to be taken back to Patterne Hall.

The "something" that Clara cannot pin down in this scene can be interpreted as her realization, on some deep level of her psyche, that Vernon is romantically attracted to her. Certainly this is part of what is going on inside her, but equally important is her recognition of Vernon's fitness as a mate (Conrow 202). Vernon has held her to a high standard by advising her to take responsibility for her change of heart about Willoughby. At the same time, though, he respects her sovereignty enough to want her to make her own decision. His drinking from the same cup says, on an archetypal level which has affected Clara in a way words cannot, that he reverences her as an individual and will remain her friend no matter how she decides. Vernon thus brings together both meanings of the loving cup: as a bond between husband and wife in the marriage ceremony, and as a pledge of faith among two "comrades."

The marriage of Clara and Vernon is thus very much in keeping with Meredith's principles, and with the philosophical undergirding of *The Egoist* as a whole. Nevertheless, it remains less than satisfying to many readers on an emotional level. The reason for this, I believe, is that Meredith hewed so closely to Mill's theories about the proper relationship between men and women. Mill's ideal of marriage, while intellectually pleasing, is rather bloodless. His description of "two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them" sounds more like a précis of a strong platonic friendship than of a marriage. So, in fact, does Clara's longing for a "comrade" who will leave her "deeper feelings untroubled." Critics

of *The Egoist* have found her and Vernon too chaste and passionless.³⁴ So, perhaps, did Meredith, who called *The Egoist* “a comedy with only half of me in it” and claimed it “[came] mainly from the head and has nothing to kindle imagination” (qtd. in Beer 489). He may have felt that the comedic structure of the novel and the philosophical tenets he was determined to get across hampered his creative expression. In one of his next novels, *Diana of the Crossways*, however, he re-examines his views towards love, sexuality, and marriage, and tempers his need for philosophical rigor and narrative control. The result is that *Diana* is a less perfect novel than *The Egoist*, but perhaps it is a more vital one.

³⁴Conrow does consider Clara sexual, though mainly through analogy with Diana Warwick (203). As I shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, I find Diana the more sexual of the two characters, and the one whose sexual development is more crucial to the novel in which she appears.

CHAPTER 4

READING FOR THE SOUL: *DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS*

Talking of Mrs Leslie Stephen, Mr Meredith said, "I want to make a portrait of her when I get her more by heart." Signor [G. F. Watts] mentioned that George Eliot had said that she did not draw from life. "Oh, I do," Meredith answered emphatically, "but never till I know them by heart." – Mrs. Walter Palmer (qtd. in Stevenson 308)

Though the novel is much neglected today, *Diana of the Crossways* made a powerful impression on its first reviewers. To them, George Meredith had achieved something remarkable: the creation of a character so real she appeared to take on flesh and blood. "He has made [Diana] move and speak before us as a living woman, dowered with exceptional gifts of 'blood and brains,'" declared William Cosmoe Monkhouse in the *Saturday Review* (qtd. in Williams 263), while an anonymous reviewer for the *Illustrated London News* claimed,

The author makes his heroine—Diana—a moving, living, breathing being; with a rare beauty, a rare wit, so alive to the reader that time passes on and he feels that she also is living her life, with all its storms, its passing currents, its amusements, its interest. . . . [T]he heroine is the key-note to the book—the presiding central figure round which all the others revolve, not as round an exaggerated deity, but round what is assuredly more attractive, as it is certainly more difficult of description—a perfectly natural woman. (qtd. in Williams 268-70)

Other reviewers were moved to philosophize on the nature of artistic creation after reading *Diana*. W. E. Henley wrote for *The Athenaeum* that

Diana's experiences are so much life taken in the fact. She speaks, and it is from her very heart; she suffers and rejoices, and it is in her own flesh and her own soul; she thinks, aspires, labours, wins, loses, and wins again with an intensity of perception, and emotional directness and completeness, that, so cunning is the author's hand and so unerring his principle of selection, affect the reader more

powerfully than the spectacle of nature itself: as a great portrait is more persuasive and imposing than its original . . . This is indeed the merit and distinction of art: to be more real than reality, to be not nature, but nature's essence. (qtd. in Williams 258)

Arthur Symons likewise praised Meredith's ability to "select" the precise words and phrases that would convince the reader Diana was "real":

[Meredith] has comprehension of a character from height to depth through that 'eye of steady flame', which he attributes to Shakespeare, and which may be defined in every great artist. He sees it, he beholds a complete nature, at once and in entirety. His task is to make others see what he sees. But this cannot be done at a stroke. It must be done little by little, touch upon touch, light upon shade, shade upon light. The completeness, as seen as by the seer or creator—the term is the same—must be microscopically investigated, divided into its component parts, produced piece by piece, and connected visibly. It is this that is meant when we talk of analysis; and the antithesis between analysis and creation is hardly so sheer as it seems. Partly through a selection of appropriate action, partly through the revealing casual speech, the imagined character takes palpable form; finally it does, or it should, live and breathe before the reader with some likeness of the hue and breath of actual life. . . . But there is a step farther, and it is this step that Mr Meredith is strenuous to take. You have the flesh, animate it with spirit, with soul. Here is the task for the creator. If his eye be not of steady flame, if it falter here, he is lost. But seeing with the perfect completeness of that vision, it is possible, step by step, with a trained multitude of the keenest words of our speech, to make plain, though in our groping twilight, the incredible acts of the soul. (qtd. in Williams 276-77)

These reviewers simultaneously view Diana both as an artificial creation, a product of human skill and labor, and as a "living" being, a "perfectly natural woman." They are equally fascinated by the "realness" of Diana, how she appears to them like any woman they could sit down and converse with, and by the talent and mechanisms Meredith used to set her into motion. Henley and Symons, in particular, view Meredith as similar to an Impressionist painter who painstakingly covers his canvas with tiny, "cunning," calculated strokes until his portrait is complete and a vibrant, somehow ensouled woman leaps into view. In this chapter, I will continue the critical project Henley and Symons began in their reviews by examining Meredith's presentation of Diana's consciousness to

determine how he created such a convincing portrayal of the inner workings of the feminine mind.

The plot of the novel is as follows: Diana Merion, a beautiful, spirited Irish girl of nineteen, enters society and immediately attracts the attention of many men. Her closest relationship, though, is with her older friend, Emma Dunstane. Thomas Redworth particularly admires Diana, but does not court her as he believes he does not yet earn enough money to support her in the style to which she has become accustomed.

One day, Emma's obtuse husband, Sir Lukin, attempts to seduce Diana. Ashamed and unable to tell Emma what has happened, Diana stays away from her friend for many months, communicating with her only by letter. (During this period the reader, too, learns about Diana's experiences only through Emma; they are not narrated directly.) Diana hastily marries Augustus Warwick, a cold man for whom she is ill-suited. She also befriends an older man, Lord Dannisburgh. Reading too much into his wife's platonic relationship with Dannisburgh, Warwick sues her for adultery. Diana panics and, in a hastily composed letter to Emma, states she plans to leave the country. Emma knows that to do so would ruin Diana's reputation, and she sends Redworth to find Diana before Diana can do anything rash. Redworth and Emma convince Diana to stay in England and stand trial, which she does, though a whiff of scandal still clings to her name.

In the next movement of the novel, Diana visits the Alps, where the pristine beauty of nature makes her feel reborn. There, she meets a young politician, Percy Dacier. It is clear Diana and Dacier are attracted to one another, but, as she is still legally married to Warwick and he is half-heartedly courting a pious young lady named Constance Asper,

they cannot have any kind of relationship. Diana's experiences have also left her wary of love.

Upon returning to England, Diana moves to London and embarks upon a career as a novelist. She begins moving in political circles and her friendship with Dacier blossoms. Warwick suffers a heart attack and is left an invalid; he requests that Diana come to see him, but she refuses. At last Dacier confesses to Diana that he loves her. She agrees to elope with him, but, before she can meet him at the train station, Redworth arrives with the news that Emma is gravely ill. Diana rushes to her friend's side, leaving Dacier stranded at the station.

Later, Dacier and Diana renew their relationship, but Diana persists on calling it a "friendship" and will allow him no physical gestures of affection. One night, Dacier reveals to her a huge political secret: his party chief has decided to repeal the Corn Laws. He forces Diana to kiss him and implies strongly that she should go to bed with him. Diana breaks away, and, later that night, sells Dacier's secret to the newspaper editor Tonans. The next morning, it's in all the papers, and Dacier is both furious and bewildered. When Diana admits to selling the secret, Dacier cuts her off cruelly, and Diana falls ill with brain fever. Emma gradually nurses her back to health, and, it is implied, saves her from certain death. She takes Diana home to her country estate, Copsley, to recover.

Meanwhile, Warwick dies and Redworth makes a fortune investing in railroads. Dacier quickly marries Constance Asper, and, when Diana is well enough to re-enter society, she treats them graciously. Diana and Redworth's friendship deepens, and one day he proposes. Still fearful of intimacy, Diana refuses, and is strongly rebuked by

Emma, who tells her that Redworth is a good and generous man who has loved her from afar for years. Diana comes to recognize Redworth's good character, falls in love with him, and marries him. The novel ends on a scene of Diana, now pregnant, and Emma clasping hands.

Though this bare plot summary can make the novel sound somewhat melodramatic, when reading it one's credulity is barely strained. The reason for this, I believe, is that Meredith focuses far less on the external events than on his characters' psychological responses to those events: the real plot of the novel takes place less in the drawing-rooms of London than it does inside the mind of Diana.

In my analysis of the "brainstuff" of this "fiction," I will build on the work of other critics who have demonstrated some of the ways in which Meredith, in Symons's words, illustrated the "incredible acts of the soul." In particular, I draw upon Gillian Beer's insightful discussion of Meredith's depiction of character in *Meredith: A Change of Masks*. Beer argues that Meredith's approach to character in *Diana of the Crossways* was in many ways closer to that of Modernists like Lawrence than to contemporaries such as Eliot (141). "[T]he movement of the work is seismographic" rather than linear, she claims (140). As Beer demonstrates, Diana does not progress from ignorance to enlightenment in a way intended to educate the reader; rather, her development is organic. Her character fluctuates from day to day, and her emotional growth appears to drive the plot rather than the plot being contrived to further her development. Subconscious forces of which she is only dimly aware drive her to act in ways which her rational mind can find no explanation for. As Beer puts it,

In the course of his analytic explorations [Meredith] largely abandons the notion of congruity of character—the idea of a coherent pattern of behaviour appropriate to a particular person which excludes a whole range of possible actions. In works such as *Diana of the Crossways* . . . he suggests that a personality may express itself in actions showing widely various moral qualities, and that the traditional ethical hierarchy is inadequate as a guide for our response to individuality. (141)

Beer also points out, as do Neil Roberts and Judith Wilt, that Diana is a woman divided against herself (Roberts 217-19; Wilt 71-4). Throughout the novel, Diana's self-image as a cold, detached, intellectual, and asexual woman is placed in conflict with her impulsive, emotional, sexual, and "passionate" temperament. Roberts notes that this conflict creates issues of authenticity for Diana: she wants desperately to be "sincere" ("Let me be myself, whatever the martyrdom!" she cries at one crucial point) (*Diana* 99), but is unable to be honest even with herself (Roberts 217-19). When forced to act charming and untroubled while she feels the opposite, Diana suffers deep pangs of guilt and shame. Roberts surmises that, by shaping his heroine in this way, Meredith "brings the very nature of sincerity into question" (218).

Wilt concurs that "the truth of Diana's character" is that she is "deceived in her reading of herself" (71). Though Wilt does not deal with *Diana of the Crossways* at length, many of her points about Meredith's novels in general are germane to *Diana*. She claims that all Meredith's novels contain similar "subplots" in which Meredith educates his readers about the right and wrong ways to read both fiction and life (4-10). Wilt names Meredith's ideal reader—the one he tries to shape his audience into becoming—the "Civilized Reader" (5). She argues that, in *Diana*, Meredith leads his readers to sympathize with his heroine and thereby cast off the strictures of conventional plot: "The [civilized] reader will surely accept Meredith's invitation to . . . identify with Diana and her will to be free of schemes, plots, conventions—even a novelist's" (70). More

controversial is Wilt's claim that marriage to Redworth is Diana's "chosen ending" and that Meredith intended it as a shock to the "civilized reader" whom he had led to identify with Diana's intellect rather than her passionate temperament (72-74).

Following along the lines of Wilt's argument, Gayla McGlamery interprets the intricate Preface to *Diana* as an attempt on Meredith's part to train his audience to read rightly. In the Preface, Meredith introduces Diana to us via a series of diary entries written by men who knew her in her prime. These diarists variously praise, censure, and gossip about Diana, relating anecdotes about her, speculating about her culpability, and passing on her witty *bon mots*. In some cases she is quoted directly; in others the diarists are quoted directly; and the bulk of the time the narrator paraphrases what is in the entries. McGlamery suggests that this unusual opening "introduces . . . the multi-voiced or dialogic method utilized in the rest of the novel" (par. 5) and that Meredith uses it to convey

that information must be gathered from many sources and distilled carefully if we are to arrive at something approaching the truth. The preface compels the reader to suspend judgment about which voice is "right" and to gather information cautiously. In a sense, it becomes a training exercise for the novel ahead. (par. 5)

To these critics' observations about Meredith's exploration of the female psyche in *Diana*, I would like to add my own. In this chapter, I will first grapple with the question of how didactic the novel is meant to be and whether or not Diana can be said to "improve" or progress over the course of the novel. I will argue that Meredith does intend for his audience to glean moral lessons from reading about Diana's experiences, but that the way he presents Diana's path towards greater self-knowledge is distinctly different from that of other Victorian writers.

Then, I will explore the question of the stable self in *Diana*. Some critics have argued that, for Meredith, the self was always malleable and changing; I will claim, however, that, though Meredith sees the self as capable of great flexibility, and “acting” and necessary in order for one to navigate society successfully, he does believe that people have a central core or “soul” which remains constant throughout life.

Next, I will discuss Meredith’s subtle and playful reworking of cultural scripts. Several critics, notably Roberts and McGlamery, have noted that Meredith questions the novel form—particularly the comedic ending of marriage--in *Diana* (Roberts 223-24; McGlamery par. 56-57). Rather than focus on how Meredith critiques the novel form itself, I will examine the cultural scripts that influence his characters. In particular, I will concentrate on Victorian feminism and the ways Diana defines herself in opposition to misogynistic constructions of womanhood. I will also discuss the chivalric script in detail, and how Meredith re-appropriates this script for women and for friends rather than lovers.

Finally, I will consider the much-debated ending of the novel. Meredith’s choice to “marry Diana off” has raised the hackles of many critics, who find this a disappointingly conservative conclusion to Diana’s story. (Others, however, argue that Redworth is an appropriate mate for Diana and that marriage is the best possible ending for her under the circumstances.) I will argue that Meredith does not want us to take the end of the novel as the “end” of Diana. Instead, I theorize he wants us to see her as persisting beyond the book. His ending is Lawrentian, in many ways, like the ending of *The Rainbow*. Marriage, Meredith wants us to see, is simply one more stage in Diana’s yet-to-be-concluded development, and not to be read as final.

I.

Concerns about the morality of self-presentation haunted Meredith throughout much of his life. He was born, after all, into a middle-class family with aspirations towards gentility: his father and grandfather perpetuated the myth that they were the descendants of Tudor kings, his father going so far as to list his profession as “gentleman” on his marriage certificate.¹ Melchizedek Meredith spent lavishly and hobnobbed with the local gentry, even developing a passion for fox hunting; Augustus likewise lived beyond his means, spoiling George with velvet clothes, expensive toys, and education at a private school. This pose must have seemed more than a little hollow to the younger Meredith, who watched his father mismanage his money, lose his tailor’s shop to a rival, and marry his housekeeper, a woman with the charmingly plebian name of Matilda Buckett (Stevenson 2-10).

The failure of Meredith’s marriage, as previously discussed, only intensified Meredith’s anxiety about self-presentation. *Modern Love*, in particular, captures the strain of keeping up the appearance of a happy marriage, and also Meredith’s fear that acting could become *too* seductive, and that the lines between his “true” identity and his assumed one could become indelibly blurred.

Diana, like the husband in *Modern Love*, becomes “enamoured of an acting” over the course of *Diana of the Crossways*, and she, too, questions whether, through her presentations of her self, she is contributing to institutions which cause harm to her and to others of her sex. She begins the novel, however, a naïve, idealistic girl of eighteen

¹Augustus Meredith did so on his second marriage certificate, in 1839; he was bankrupt and working as a journeyman tailor at the time (Stevenson 9).

whose most-cherished virtue is her integrity. The importance Diana places on “always being [her]self” (71) is most evident in her closest relationship: her friendship with Emma Dunstane.

Emma and Diana, as the narrator tells us, aspire to “a classic friendship between women, the alliance of a mutual devotedness men choose to doubt of” (105). Their friendship is partly founded on intellectual congress; together, they form a sort of literary society *à deux*: “they were readers of books of all sorts, political, philosophical, economic, romantic; and they mixed the diverse readings in thought, after the fashion of the ardently youthful. Romance affected politics, transformed economy, irradiated philosophy” (79) . More than this, the women serve as moral touchstones for one another, vowing perfect transparency in their correspondence: “But your voice or mine, madre, it’s one soul,” Diana tells Emma at one point. “Be sure I am giving up the ghost when I cease to be one soul with you, dear and dearest! No secrets, never a shadow of a deception, or else I shall feel I am not fit to live” (71). Likewise, at one point Redworth rebukes Diana with the words, “Friendship, I fancy, means one heart between two.” Diana is stunned into silence by his remark, for “[h]is unstressed observation hit a bell in her head, and left it reverberating. She and Emma had spoken, written the very words” (122). They even go so far as to make their friendship “a pledge of belief in eternity” (135).

In some ways, Emma and Diana’s declarations to one another echo marriage vows. They speak of being two in body but one in heart and soul, much as the gospel reading often used in marriage ceremonies runs, “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh” (Matthew 19:6). Diana claims that she will she not be separated, even in her words

or thoughts, from Emma until her death (“Be sure that I am giving up the ghost when I cease to be one soul with you”). The women even surpass the marriage vows in making their friendship the basis of their belief in eternity: rather than swearing to and by God that they will always be faithful, they reverse the conditions, seeing in their devotion to one another a sign that God exists. Their avowal of their relationship, in fact, can be seen as a feminist gesture: instead of swearing by a patriarchal God in order to validate their relationship, their first point of reference is their feminine bodies and hearts.

Friendship, for these women, seems to take the place of marriage physically as well.² They are bodily affectionate with one another, and are frequently pictured kissing and embracing, even ardently so. When reuniting at the Irish ball after a long absence, they greet each other like divided lovers:

[Diana] came darting on a trip of little runs, both hands out, all her face one tender sparkle of a smile; and her cry proved the quality of her blood: “Emmy! Emmy! my heart!

“My dear Tony! I should not have come but for the hope of seeing you here.”

Lord Larrian [who had been admiring the marriageable Diana from afar] rose and received a hurried acknowledgement of his courtesy from the usurper of his place.

“Emmy! we might kiss and hug; we’re in Ireland. I burn to!” (65)

And in one crucial scene of the novel, which I shall discuss in detail later, the women lie in bed together, embracing in a sexually-charged fashion. The metaphorical language Meredith employs in this scene suggests that it in effect consummates their “marriage.” Interestingly, there is a maternal element to their friendship as well: Emma reports that

²Emma’s marriage to Sir Lukin is problematic, and, likely, sterile. They have no children, and Emma’s invalid condition seems to render marital relations between them impossible. Though he loves Emma, Lukin philanders, and even attempts to seduce Diana at one point. Emma, for her part, is far closer emotionally to Diana than she is to her husband.

she “nursed” (in this case, tended to) Diana when Diana was an infant (64), and Diana occasionally calls Emma “madre” (70, 71).³

Though Emma and Diana do not view themselves as lesbian or bisexual, they are conscious, at least on certain levels, of the subversive nature of their relationship. They self-consciously position their friendship against their culture’s view of women as fickle, capricious, and ruled by emotion rather than principles. The gulf between the sexes forms a frequent topic of their conversation, and they regard their friendship as “an alliance of a mutual devotedness men choose to doubt of” (135). The repercussions of this belief, however, are that, in being the least bit “unfaithful” to one another, the women also betray their vow and their sex as a whole. For example, when Diana writes her an unusually terse, artificial-sounding letter telling her that she is engaged, Emma feels that Diana has dealt a “wound” to their friendship, and thinks that Diana has “injur[ed] their sex” as well. She thinks that “it might now, after such an example, verily seem that women are incapable of a translucent perfect confidence: -- their impulses, caprices, desperations, tricks of concealment, trip a heart-whole friendship” (92). After Diana’s marriage, Diana now stands, in her eyes, “as one essentially with the common order of women. . . . She degraded their mutual high standard of womankind” (92).

Diana struggles even more mightily than Emma with issues of fidelity and sincerity to her friend. Meredith foreshadows her struggle in the very first conversation in the novel between the two women, when she describes the problems she had writing to Emma following Emma’s marriage: “Men are the barriers to perfect naturalness, at least, with girls, I think. You wrote to me in the same tone as ever, and at first I had a struggle to reply. And I, who have such pride in being always myself!” (71). While enmeshed in her

³Notably, Diana is an orphan who does not remember her mother.

female dyad with Emma, Diana had no trouble writing “naturally,” “soul to soul” to Emma. But when men enter the picture, metaphorically forcing Diana from her “madre’s” womb, she can no longer communicate with Emma as though they are one. She must individualize herself, and to do so she has to take on a false persona, writing in a voice she does not recognize. Though Diana suffers guilt over not being “herself,” Meredith suggests that role-play is nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, he naturalizes role-play, viewing it as an essential part of personality formation.

Diana’s long struggle to accept the various facets of her psyche, even those she has little control over, is the main source of tension in the novel. One of the key passages relating to her struggle—and a fine illustration of the nuances of Meredith’s depiction of the psyche—is the letter she writes to Emma about her decision to flee the country. It bears quoting at length:

Ireland, or else America, it is a guiltless kind of suicide to bury myself abroad. [Warwick] has my letters. They are such as I can own to you, and ask you to kiss me—and kiss me when you have heard all the evidence, all that I can add to it, kiss me. You know me too well to think I would ask you to kiss criminal lips. But I cannot face the world. In the dock, yes. Not where I am expected to smile and sparkle, on pain of incurring suspicion if I show a sign of oppression. I cannot do that. I see myself wearing a false grin—your Tony! No, I do well to go. This is my resolution; and in consequence, my beloved! my only truly loved on earth! I do not come to you, to grieve you, as I surely should. Nor would it soothe me, dearest. This will be to you the best of reasons. It could not soothe me to see myself giving pain to Emma. I am like a pestilence, and let me swing away to the desert, for there I do no harm. I know I am right. I have questioned myself—it is not cowardice. I do not quail. I abhor the part of actress. I should do it too well; destroy my soul in the performance. Is a good name before such a world as this worth that sacrifice? A convent and self-quenching;—cloisters would seem to me like holy dew. . . .

I am henceforth dead to the world. Never dead to Emma till my breath is gone—poor flame! I blow at a bed-room candle, by which I write in a brown fog, and behold what I am—though not even serving to write such a tangled scrawl as this. . . . Some years hence a grey woman may return, to hear of a butterfly Diana, that had her day and disappeared. Better than a mewling and courtseying simulacrum of the woman—I drivel again. . . . I am not mistress of myself, and do as something within me, wiser than myself, dictates.—You will write kindly. Write

your whole heart. It is not compassion I want, I want you. I can bear stripes from you. Let me hear Emma's voice—the true voice. This running away merits your reproaches. It will look like— I have more to confess: the *tigress* in me wishes it were! I should then have a reckless passion to fold me about, and the glory— infernal, if you name it so, and so it would be—of suffering for and *with* some one else. As it is, I am utterly solitary, sustained neither from above nor below, except within myself, and that is all fire and smoke, like their new engines (104-05).

Notable in this letter is the degree to which Emma serves Diana as a moral touchstone.

Emma becomes, for her, the equivalent of the Bible on which witnesses swear in court:

“[My letters to Lord Dannisburgh] are such as I can own to you, and ask you to kiss me. .

. . You know me too well to think I would ask you to kiss criminal lips” (104). Emma,

too, is the judge and jury whose verdict she is most concerned about: “Write your whole

heart. It is not compassion I want, I want you. I can bear stripes from you. Let me hear

Emma's voice—the true voice. This running away merits your reproaches” (104). Here,

as in other sections of the novel, she “confesses” to Emma as one would to a priest,

noting that Emma would probably find it “infernal” for her to have had a lover.

Emma's opinion, then, means more to Diana than the world's, the law's, or even the

Church's.⁴ In the absence of a God or of an ethical framework derived from society,

Diana takes her friend for her highest moral arbiter. But doing so leaves her, in moral

terms, on shaky ground. Her friendship-based moral framework can only be successful if

both she and Emma remain of the highest possible moral fiber, and that, since they are

“two hearts in one,” they are absolutely transparent in their dealings with one another.

Yet even in this, her “confession,” Diana is hiding something from Emma. The major

thrust of the letter is her insistence that she was innocent of any wrongdoing with Lord

Dannisburgh. But she was romantically attracted to the lord, if unaware of the true extent

⁴Emma and Diana make a few scanty references to a deistic God, but faith is not an important element of either woman's character. Constance Asper, tellingly, is the sole adherent to organized religion in the novel.

of her feelings. For example, when Emma worried aloud that Lord Dannisburgh might be sexually attracted to Diana, Diana told her that “[Lord Dannisburgh] is the kindest of souls. And soul I say. He is the one man among men who gives me notions of a soul in men. . . . He is past thoughts of catching [women], dearest. At that age men are pools of fish, or what you will: they are not anglers” (101). Here, Diana is clearly both trying to re-create her friendship with Emma with a man, and to compartmentalize Lord Dannisburgh as a “friend” in order to keep him out of the sexual realm which threatens her. Only after she has been accused of adultery is she able to admit to herself that his attentions were other than friendly: “But the holding of her hand by the friend half a minute too long for friendship, and the overfriendliness of looks, letters, frequency of visits, would speak within her” (124). What Diana is not able to own up to is her own attraction to him. She hides her feelings by drawing hard and fast boundaries between friendship and love:

“he was never a dishonourable friend; but men appear to be capable of friendship with women only for as long as we keep out of pulling distance of that line when friendship ceases. *They* may step on it; *we* must hold back a league. I have learnt it. . . . As for him, he is a man; at his worst, not one of the worst; at his best, better than very many. There, now, Emma, you have me stripped and burning; there is my full confession” (133).

Semi-consciously, though, she is aware that she had feelings for the man, and this fact causes her a vague sense of guilt—at being unfaithful to her husband, at undermining her chaste façade, at confirming stereotypes about her gender⁵, and most of all, at threatening Emma’s high opinion of her.

⁵Diana reveals her concern for how she appears as a representative of her sex in the eyes of others when she writes, “It must be confessed that I have also more knowledge of men and the secret contempt—it must be—the best of them entertain for us. Oh! and we confirm it if we trust them” (104).

Warwick's divorce suit shakes the already-trembling foundations of Diana's moral framework, causing her an epistemological crisis. She feels alienated ("I am utterly solitary, sustained neither from above nor below, except within myself") (105), depressive ("it would be a guiltless kind of suicide to bury myself abroad"; "A convent and self-quenching; -- cloisters would seem to me like holy dew") (104), and as though she is not in control of her own actions ("I am not mistress of myself, and do as something within me, wiser than I, dictates") (105). Diana responds to this distress by clinging to her chief value—integrity—and using it as an excuse to flee her shame:

"I abhor the part of actress. I should do it well—too well; destroy my soul in the performance. Is a good name before such a world as this worth that sacrifice? . . .

Some years hence a grey woman may return, to hear of a butterfly Diana, that had her day and disappeared. Better than a mewling and courtseying simulacrum of the woman." (104-05)

Her reasons for finding acting "abhorrent" are complex. Besides the fact that she would feel hypocritical at pretending to be sprightly when she was feeling miserable, she also finds the role of "innocent, victimized wife" distasteful. She is too strong of character to be at home in such a passive role; moreover, she is willing to admit that she was partly responsible for the breakdown of her marriage (if not for her flirtation with Lord Dannisburgh), and playing victim thus would be lying. The role of guileless innocent also offends her feminist sensibilities. But also, in a very Meredithian fashion, Diana has contempt for an "audience" that has compassion for the "poor victimized wife," especially when she bears some culpability for her plight.

Diana also may fear allying herself with a role which carried a social stigma. As Kerry Powell reports in *Women and Victorian Theatre*, actresses were often aligned in the Victorian mind with prostitution, perversion, disease, madness, and death. Actresses—

women who earned their own money, expressed violent emotion on stage, and adopted a variety of alternate “selves” with astonishing success—lived outside the boundaries of conventional femininity and thus were a source of anxiety to many Victorians. This anxiety was revealed in numerous plays and novels in which talented actresses succumbed to destitution, madness, or “brain fever,” or else were recuperated into “respectable” society via marriage (31-63). Actresses were also portrayed as doubting their own selfhood, as does the character Gertrude White in William Black’s novel

Macleod of Dare (1878):

It is a continual degradation—the exhibition of feelings that ought to be a woman’s most sacred and secret possession. And what will the end of it be? Already I begin to think I don’t know what I am. I have to sympathize with so many characters—I have to be so many different people—that I don’t quite know what my own character is, or if I have any at all. (qtd. in Powell 25)

Reviewers consistently associated top actresses with animals, chthonian forces, and supernatural beings. George Henry Lewes’s review of an actress playing Phaedra is representative:

Rachel was the panther of the stage; with a panther’s terrible beauty and undulating grace she moved and stood, glared and sprang. There always seemed something not human about her. . . . Scorn, triumph, rage, lust and merciless malignity she could represent in symbols of irresistible power; but she had little tenderness, no womanly caressing softness, no gaiety, no heartiness. (qtd. in Powell 13-14)

Diana, thrust into the role of fallen woman by her husband’s accusations of adultery, faces the prospect of occupying the same social space as the actress—and she balks at it. She appears to share her culture’s misgivings about actresses, declaring that to act would be to undergo a moral fall (“I should do it too well—destroy my soul in the process”). Valuing integrity as she does, the actress represents transgression to her as well. Diana also associates the actress with the dissolution of the self. During her crisis, she comes to

resemble the animalistic, passion-maddened actress of Victorian popular culture.

Clinging to an ideal of “integrity” gives her a sense of security. The actress may even represent her shadow self—the passionate nature she tries so diligently to repress.

Diana’s fear of taking on the role of actress has other psychological underpinnings, though—ones she is not even aware of. In particular, her half-repressed sexual attraction to Lord Dannisburgh violates her self-concept as virginal, self-contained, and utterly independent of men. Sexuality, at least in women, is a flaw, a spot, a sin she cannot abide in herself nor admit into her self-concept without having to revise that concept extensively. She relegates sexuality and romance to those “other” women she and Emma have so much disdain for—the silly, emotional, unreliable, man-crazed women of misogynist stereotype. (In their own way, Emma and Diana can be as misogynistic as any man: they want rights not so much for all women as for themselves.) When she becomes dimly aware of her sexual impulses, Diana, to preserve her “perfection,” considers running away to a country where no one is aware of her “sin” and she can start anew. (She is far more concerned about what her “audience” thinks of her than she likes to let on!) Her briefly-entertained fantasy of joining a convent brings these deeper impulses to the surface: she desires purity, chastity, and an impeccable image in the eyes of the world.

Thus, Diana *is* acting, in a way; what matters to her is the kind of role she is adopting. What Diana does not realize is that, even in the very writing of this letter, she is playing a role. Her self-consciousness shows through in words such as “I drivell again” and “such a tangled scrawl as this,” and in her mental picture of herself writing at her bedroom candle: she is very much aware, if unreflective of, both the act of writing and her

audience. The part she is playing is one she maintains throughout the novel: that of “Tony,” Emma’s devoted friend. (Meredith underscores this fact by having the women frequently refer to themselves in the third person when they talk to one another.) To preserve these roles, the women must idealize one another, and themselves. “It could not soothe me to see myself giving pain *to Emma*,” Diana says in the letter, and “Let me hear *Emma’s voice—the true voice*” (105; emphasis mine). Through her language, Diana reveals that she views an image of Emma that is somewhat abstracted from what her friend is in reality. The concept “Emma,” dangerously, sometimes impinges on Emma herself, with her own feelings and desires, and who may not always remain the same.

In holding these high ideals of one another, Diana and Emma—perhaps unbeknownst to them—are enacting a cultural script: the script of “romantic friendship” Lillian Faderman outlines in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Faderman points out many instances, both in history and in literature, of women friends who loved one another passionately in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Romantic friendship,” as such relationships were called, was accepted as a normal part of a girl’s development, though it was expected that she would eventually “grow out of” the deep friendship and transfer her affections to a man. Such pairs of friends vowed lifelong devotion to one another, and spoke and wrote to one another in an almost lover-like fashion; some dreamed of running away to live together in the fashion of the Ladies of Llongollen (103-43).⁶ The trope persisted in literature, popular culture, and in real women’s lives well into the nineteenth century, and is visible in such works as Hardy’s *Desperate Remedies* (1871), Louisa May Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *A Mortal*

⁶Faderman does write, briefly, about *Diana* in her book, noting, oddly, that “[m]ale-female relationships are always a dismal failure in this novel” (163).

Antipathy (1885), and Florence Converse's New Woman novel *Diana Victrix* (1897), as well as in the letters of Emily Dickinson to Sue Gilbert (166-76).

Even among dear friends, then, Meredith suggests, "sincerity" is not possible—if, by "sincerity," one means acting in perfect accordance with one's emotions and never putting on the slightest semblance of an act. But Meredith, unlike his heroine, does not find this idea cause for alarm. Rather, he vindicates acting throughout the novel, suggesting that role-play is inevitable both in any kind of social intercourse and within the psyche itself. Moral choice, he intimates, consists not in choosing whether or not to act, but in selecting the roles that help one to thrive and do well by others, and rejecting the ones that limit personal growth and self-knowledge and cause one to objectify others. It is this realization that Diana comes to at the close of the novel, when she discovers that her dependence on the Diana-the-huntress role has cut her off from her sexual side, and that her insistence on seeing potential lovers as knights in shining armor has blinded her to Redworth's virtues.

Meredith's validation of acting is reinforced by the imagery he uses in the scene in which Diana first returns to high society following her trial. In one of the most overt instances of the chivalric script in the novel, Diana imagines the drawing room she is to enter as her "battle-front" and her ability to hide her emotions her "armor" ("She fancied she had put on proof-armour, unconscious that it was the turning of the inward flutterer to steel which supplied her cuirass and shield") (142-43). Though she acts like one overcome by "a strange fit of childishness," to herself she appears a "towering Britomart" (143). This image of herself as chaste, cold warrior helps her to get through the evening ahead. Indeed, she regards it as an ordeal: "[Redworth] does not see that unless I go

through the fire there is no justification for this wretched character of mine!” (143), she thinks at one point.

Though the imagery of knighthood is Diana’s own, and is perhaps a bit melodramatic, Meredith’s narrator sanctions her use of it, and in fact argues that Diana is doing rightful combat in her own sphere:

She was perforce the actress of her part. In happier times, when light of heart and natural, her vogue had not been so enrapturing. . . . It is a terrible decree, that all must act who would prevail; and the more extended the audience, the greater need for the mask and buskin. . . .

Nature taught [Diana] these arts [of acting] . . . They are the woman’s arts of self-defence, as legitimately and honourably hers as the manful use of fists with a coarser sex. (144).

Here Meredith takes a misogynistic stereotype and turns it on its head. Women *are* charming, and chameleonic, and even deceptive, he states; what is more, they are so by “nature.” But, he argues, society is yet so hostile to women who are morally “spotted,” like Diana, that such women have to charm and cajole if they are to have any kind of social success.⁷ Women defend themselves with wit, flattery, and the social graces, just as men do with their bodies. Male combat, he even hints, is in some ways inferior to feminine warfare: “coarser,” more animalistic, less evolved.

Diana, little by little, comes to accept the narrator’s viewpoint. “An odd world, where for the sin we have not participated in we must fib and continue fibbing” (135), she reflects before her “ordeal.” But already she is coming to accept the necessity of acting, as shown by her revealing glimpse in the mirror: “when she looked in the glass and mused on uttering the word, ‘Liar!’ to the lovely image, her senses were refreshed, her mind somewhat relieved, the face appeared so sovereignly defiant of abasement” (135).

⁷Meredith would also claim that people are called, in a Carlylean fashion, to perform the work they are most capable of in the society that they find themselves in. Retreat, therefore, would not be a viable option for a true Meredithian heroine. As Emma tells Diana, “You were created for the world, Tony” (361).

Valuing sincerity as she does, Diana may have half-expected to have seen the signs of her “deception” written, Dorian Gray-like, on her face. The sight of her reflected loveliness ensures that, to society at least, she will appear unblemished. Her social self, no matter what inner turmoil she may be experiencing, is hers to mold—there is comfort in possessing a spotless mask.

Meredith is accepting of the adoption of roles in the inner realm as well as the outer one. In fact, he suggests that one of the ways the psyche functions is by briefly adopting roles, especially in times of crisis. When Diana is debating with herself whether to leave England, for example, she takes on the role of lawyer defending her own case:

The unfriendliness of the friends who sought to retain her recurred. For look—to fly could not be interpreted as a flight. It was but a stepping aside, a disdain of defending herself, and a wrapping herself in her dignity. Women would be with her. She called on the noblest of them to justify the course she chose, and they did, in an almost audible murmur. . . .

By staying to defend herself she forfeited her attitude of dignity and lost all chance of her reward. And name the sort of world it is, dear friends, for which we are to sacrifice our one hope of freedom, that we may preserve our fair fame in it!

. . .
The wild brain of Diana, armed by her later enlightenment as to the laws of life and nature, dashed in revolt at the laws of the world when she thought of the forces, natural and social, urging young women to marry and be bound to the end.

It should be a spotless world which is thus ruthless.

But were the world impeccable it would behave more generously.

The world is ruthless, dear friends, because the world is hypocrite! The world cannot afford to be magnanimous, or even just. . . .

Against the husband her cause was triumphant. Against herself she decided not to plead it, for this reason, that the preceding Court, which was the public and only positive one, had entirely and justly exonerated her. (123-24)

Here, Meredith brilliantly elucidates the way the mind slips into and out of roles over the course of any period of consciousness. His nimble use of both free indirect discourse and direct narration imitates the way one’s thoughts hover between harboring half-formed ideas and thinking fully-formed sentences outright. Meredith’s depiction of the

short-lived “lawyer” role also reveals its shortcomings and advantages. The fact that Diana takes it on shows she needs approval from the public badly, as much as she may deny it. However, she imagines the “public” as an idealized public—a collection of “dear friends” and “noble” women, much like Emma. Her speech may in fact indicate a buried desire for *Emma*’s approval as much as anyone’s. Diana’s turn as “lawyer” also bolsters her self-esteem and convinces her, albeit briefly, that she is justified. She sees herself as a romantic rebel, fighting against an unjust world, and not as a coward fleeing from others’ disdain. In fact, by the close of her turn as “lawyer,” Diana has worked herself up into a fever pitch:

There is perpetually an inducement to act the hypocrite before the hypocrite world, unless a woman submits to be the humbly knitting housewife, unquestioningly worshipful of her lord; for the world is ever gracious to an hypocrisy that pays homage to the mask of virtue by copying it; the world is hostile to the face of an innocence not conventionally simpering and quite surprised; the world prefers decorum to honesty. “Let me be myself, whatever the martyrdom!” she cried, in that phase of young sensation when, to the blooming woman, the putting on of a mask appears to wither her and reduce her to the show she parades. Yet, in common with her sisterhood, she owned she had worn a sort of mask; the world demands it of them as the price of their station. That she had never worn it consentingly, was the plea for now casting it off altogether, showing herself as she was, accepting martyrdom, becoming the first martyr of the modern woman’s cause—a grand position! and one acceptable to an excited mind in the dark, which does not conjure a critical humour, as light does, to correct the feverish sublimity. She was, then, this martyr, a woman, capable of telling the world she knew it, and of confessing that she had behaved in disdain of its rigider rules, according to her own ideas of her immunities. O brave!

But was she holding the position by flight? It involved the challenge of consequences, not an evasion of them.

She moaned; her mental steam-wheel stopped; fatigue brought sleep. (125)

In this passage, Meredith tellingly, and charmingly, describes the heightened, half-dreamlike state of mind people sometimes fall into right before sleep. In it, Diana pictures herself as a martyr to the woman’s cause—strangely enough, by running away. Meredith exposes how naïve and ungrounded her feeling of “heroism” is, but does so gently,

ascribing it to her youth. Importantly, this state is short-lived. Diana, unlike Willoughby Patterne and his like, is conscionable enough not to hold onto the martyr role for more than a few minutes. But, though fleeting, the role performs important psychological work: it allows Diana a brief respite into fantasy so she can think positively about herself and her situation. And it presents itself as a potential way of dealing with her problem, giving her a way she can flee and yet feel justified. Indeed, in the next chapter, we are told, “The night’s red vision of martyrdom was reserved to console her secretly, among the unopened lockers in her treasury of thoughts. It helped to sustain her; and she was too conscious of things necessary for her sustainment to bring it to the light of day and examine it” (126).

Psychic roles are important to Diana at other points in her life as well. When living independently in London, for example, she thinks of her past life as a separate persona, distinct from her present self:

This new, strange, solitary life, cut off from her adulatory society, both by the shock that made the abyss and by the utter foreignness, threw her in upon her natural forces, recasting her, and thinning away her memory of her past days, excepting girlhood, into the remote. She lived with her girlhood as with a simple little sister. They were two in one, and she corrected the dreams of the younger, protected and counselled her very sagely, advising her to love Truth and look always to Reality for her refreshment. (138)

It is clear from this passage that the trial was a turning point in Diana’s life—a crisis so severe that, having passed through it, she feels like another person altogether. Diana externalizes her memories of girlhood into a separate “character” as a means of coping. She defines herself against this “character” as a way of assuring herself that she has grown as a person through her ordeal and that she has thus gleaned some good from it. But Meredith also acutely notes the psychological mechanism by which she partly

represses the memories of her adolescence and troubled young womanhood. During this period of her life Diana psychologically repristinates herself to some extent, regarding herself as “solitary,” independent, and sexless:

She had during a couple of weeks, besides the first fresh exercising of her pen, as well as the severe gratification of economy, a savage exultation in passing through the streets on foot and unknown. Save for the plunges into the [solicitor's] office, she could seem to herself a woman who had never submitted to the yoke. What a pleasure it was, after finishing a number of pages, to start eastward towards the lawyer-regions . . . in welcome fogs, an atom of the crowd! She had an affection for the crowd. They clothed her. (138)

Diana lives, for a brief time, anonymous in chaste female solitude, with only the imago of her “simple little sister” to accompany her in the manner of a page. The archetype of Diana the virgin goddess⁸ and the New Woman are combined in her self-image.

But, as Meredith shows, no one can remain solipsistic or untouched by sexuality for very long. As his narrator openly says, “The long-suffering Fates permitted [Diana] for a term to enjoy the generous delusion” (138). Diana is harassed by men on the street, some of whom mistake her for a prostitute; the day of the trial draws near; and, the reader knows, she will grow to miss high society, her arena. The tone in which Meredith narrates Diana’s instructions to her “simple little sister” (“she corrected the dreams of the younger, protected and counselled her very sagely, advising her to love Truth and look always to Reality for her refreshment”) (138) underscores this point: Diana naively assumes she has reached a point of wisdom from which she is entitled to dispense advice. Her pretensions are shattered in short order. Meredith’s narrator thus warns against taking Diana’s “independent” phase as anything more than a temporary respite. It may be psychologically necessary—and very human—for Diana to retreat into this unsustainable, virginal pose, but the role is not to be a lasting one.

⁸She even acquires a totem animal: a large Newfoundland dog, ironically named Leander.

In fact, Meredith shows flux to be a central principle of the psyche throughout the novel. Though Diana does “develop” over the course of the novel, meaning that she grows in self-knowledge, she does not progress linearly from delusion to illumination. Rather, her psychic growth follows a wave-like pattern. Periodically, an event will shake up Diana’s self-concept, shattering her illusions about herself and causing a period of fragmentation. She will then undergo a period of re-integration, culminating in a climactic scene that usually occurs in a place of natural beauty. Speaking in broad terms, the psychic “seasons” of Diana’s life are these:

- Naïve girlhood
- Sexual harassment and Lukin’s attempt to seduce her (crisis)
- Marriage (elided; presumably a period of fragmentation)
- Lawsuit (crisis)
- Attempt at flight and “dark night of the soul” at the Crossways (nadir)
- Solitary life as author in London (re-integration)
- Trip to Lugano (climax)
- Courtship with Dacier (repression)
- Dacier’s seduction attempt / selling of the secret (crisis)
- Near-death (nadir)
- Recovery at Copsley (fragmentation, then re-integration)
- Nature-marriage to Redworth (climax)

To indicate the severity of the nadirs and climaxes of Diana’s mental life, Meredith uses the Persephone myth, and the metaphors of death and rebirth, and rape and reprimand, to heighten them. The Persephone story was an important one for Meredith: the motif appears in several of his poems, including “Love in the Valley” as well as “The Day of the Daughter of Hades” and “The Appeasement of Demeter,” which were published in the 1883 volume *A Reading of Earth* and were presumably composed during the same time period Meredith was writing *Diana*.

On her trip to Lugano, for example, Diana reaches the culmination of the feeling of virginal independence that first came over her when she was living alone in London.

Inspired by the natural beauty around her, she imagines herself a girl again, and literally and figuratively ascends towards heaven as she scales a mountain:

A linnet sung in her breast, an eagle lifted her feet. The feet were verily winged, as they are in a season of youth when the blood leaps to light from the pressure of the under forces, like a source at the wellheads, and the whole creature blooms, vital in every energy as a spirit. To be a girl again was magical. She could fancy her having risen from the dead. And to be a girl, with a woman's broader vision and receptiveness of soul, with knowledge of evil, and winging to ethereal happiness, this was a revelation of our human powers. . . .

[S]he was nowhere veiled or torpid; she was illumined, like the Salvatore she saw in the evening beams and mounted in the morning's; and she had not a spot of secrecy; all her nature flew and bloomed; she was bird, flower, flowing river, a quivering sensibility unweighted, unshrouded. . . .

Which was the dream—her past life or this ethereal existence? But this ran spontaneously, and the other had often been simulated . . . She had not a doubt that her past life was the dream, or deception: and for the reason that now she was compassionate, large of heart toward all beneath her. . . . [she had an] incapacity during this elevation and rapture of the senses to think distinctly of that One who had discoloured her opening life. Freedom to breathe, gaze, climb, grow with the grasses, fly with the clouds, to muse, tossing, to be an unclaimed self, dispersed upon earth, air, sky, to find a keener transfigured self in that radiation—she craved no more. (159-60)

Diana thinks of this moment as a time of perfect sincerity within herself: “nowhere veiled . . . not a spot of secrecy . . . unweighted, unshrouded,” and once more, she equates sincerity with the “real” (“this ran spontaneously, and the other had often been simulated”). When troubled, she looks back to her time in Lugano as the moment when she was most purely “herself.” However, Meredith does provide clues that Diana's Lugano ascent is not as “pure” and “sincere” as she might imagine. First of all, it is culturally encoded. Diana is acting in accordance with the central tenets of Romanticism: climbing mountains like Wordsworth (her ascent echoes Book XIV of *The Prelude*); communing with nature; finding in nature her “true self”; becoming more compassionate due to nature's benevolent influence. Secondly, Diana's ecstasy, “chaste” as she believes

it to be, has something to do with the fact that she has met and begun to fall in love with Dacier.

Diana's visit to the newspaper office where she sells Dacier's secret, likewise, contains overtones of death and the underworld. Tonans, the paper's editor, appears to her like "Vulcan" and his offices a dark "den": "With the rumble of his machinery about him, and fresh matter arriving and flying into the printing-press, it must be like being in the very furnace-hissing of events: an Olympian Council held in Vulcan's smithy" (285). Her journey to his office takes place at night, in a London transmuted to a Dantean hell: a "brawl of men and women in the street"; "blind and darkened houses" that Diana imagines "beholding a funeral convoy without followers" (288). And, after Dacier hears what she has done and rejects her, he metaphorically "pluck[s] the life out of her breast" and she becomes mortally ill.

Yet Diana then returns to life and health, Persephone-like, with Emma as a Demeter-figure to tend her. The heading of Chapter XL, "In Which We See Nature Making of a Woman a Maid Again, and a Thrice Whimsical," encapsulates Diana's recovery and second "repristination." As she did in Lugano, Diana comes to imagine herself pristine and "virginal." In response to her growing attraction to Redworth, she creates a psychic sphere where she can remain chaste and independent:

Consequently, at once she sent up a bubble to the skies, where it became a spherul realm, of far too fine an atmosphere for men to breathe in it; and thither she transported herself at will, whenever the contrast, with its accompanying menace of a tyrannic subjugation, overshadowed her. In the above, the kingdom composed of her shattered romance of life and her present aspirings, she was free and safe. . . . Higher and more celestial than the Salvatore, it was likewise, now she could assure herself serenely, independent of the horrid blood-emotions. Living up there, she had not a feeling. (337)

But this time, Diana has greater knowledge of herself, and is thus not able to sustain her “sphere” for long. Soon, the “maid again” consents to become a wife.

I do not mean to imply that Meredith is criticizing Diana for her entertainment of such mental states; on the contrary, Meredith finds a love of nature to be a salutary quality. Though his narrator might remind readers that Diana’s states of mind are only temporary, he does regard them as essential to her development. He is trying to transcribe the psyche and its mutability, not criticize it. His use of archetypes such as the Persephone myth and birth and death imagery underscores this fact. The psyche, Meredith suggests, has its “seasons” just as the year does. An acceptance of the changing nature of the psyche and an ability to stand back from it and analyze it, and to recognize how portions of our selves are culturally encoded may help us to become psychologically richer and more healthy.

II.

The single cultural script that meant most to George Meredith was that of the knight. Chivalry became part of his personal myth from very early on: his father and grandfather perpetuated the family legend that they were the descendants of Welsh kings and chieftains, and he grew steeped in the legend of his namesake, St. George⁹ (Stevenson 2, Jones 16-19).¹⁰ Not coincidentally, Meredith named his first son Arthur Gryffyd.¹¹ Even

⁹In a letter to Jessopp, Meredith describes being so bored in church as a boy that he would bring a book of St. George’s adventures and read it clandestinely during services (Cline 200).

¹⁰Jones points out that duels take place in five of Meredith’s novels, even though the last duel in England was fought in 1852 (19).

¹¹Gryffyd had been Peacock’s wife’s maiden name.

as a grown man, Meredith referred to himself as “Robin” in his letters to his friend William Hardman, whom he nicknamed “Tuck.”

As we have seen, Meredith grew deeply suspicious of the chivalric script after his marriage to Mary turned sour. Blaming his romantic idealism for the breakdown of his marriage, he spurned chivalric heroism as the province of naïve youngsters, ironizing it mordantly in *Modern Love* and denouncing it as sentimental in *Richard Feverel*.

In *Diana*, though, Meredith recovered the chivalric script, this time stressing the noble and self-sacrificing qualities associated with knighthood. He used the novel to rewrite the cultural script of the knight, changing the knight figure from a man defending his love interest to a person of either sex who endures hardship on behalf of his or her dear friend. In doing so, Meredith opened up the field of heroic action for women, and divorced it from romantic love. He also valorized the “friend” relationship, positing it as potentially ennobling and life-affirming as the relationship between husband and wife. In becoming a “knight” who serves her friends, and who idealizes them in a way that encourages them to develop their best qualities, Diana chooses to enact a role that is psychologically appropriate, that helps her to develop as a person, and that reflects her own development over the course of the novel.

Meredith develops the chivalric script in considerable detail throughout *Diana*. One of the ways he heroicizes the chief friendships in the novel is by having each of the three friends pass through a psychologically-harrowing “ordeal”¹² for the sake of one of the others, thereby proving his or her profound loyalty and courage. Several occurrences in the novel can be thought of as ordeals: among them Diana’s watch over the dead body of

¹²“Ordeal” was a term of some significance to Meredith, as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* amply proves. Furthermore, a character in *Diana* uses the term to describe Diana’s vigil at Lord Dannisburgh’s beside, saying, “She’ll take it as a sort of ordeal by touch” (187).

Lord Dannisburgh; Redworth's moonlight ride to the Crossways to retrieve Diana; Diana's standing guard over Emma during Emma's operation; Emma's restoring of Diana to life and health after Diana suffers what would today be called a nervous breakdown; and Redworth's long period of waiting for Diana. The language Meredith uses to describe these trials invests them with an epic quality, and suggests that, like Diana's "acting," they are the modern-day equivalent of heroic warfare. The scene in which Emma undergoes an operation for the removal of a tumor is a case in point. While Emma's husband, Sir Lukin, breaks down and cannot even bear to remain in the house, Diana stays at her friend's side throughout the procedure. During the event, Lukin describes Diana as "true as steel" (237)¹³, telling Dacier, "I've had my sword-blade tried by Indian horsemen, and I know what true as steel means . . . I'd rather go through a regiment of sabres [than watch the operation] . . . [Diana] comes out in blazing armour if you unmask a battery" (239-40). Allied with the two surgeons, representatives of modern technology (Emma has the finest doctors in England), against the current-day scourge of disease, Diana "battles" successfully for her friend's life. She emerges from the ordeal transfigured:

[Dacier] was petrified by Diana's face, and thought of her as whirled from him in a storm, bearing the marks of it. Her underlip hung for short breaths; the big drops of her recent anguish still gathered on her brows; her eyes were tearless, lustreless; she looked ancient in youth, and distant by a century, like a tall woman of the vaults, issuing white-ringed, not of our light (241).

Likewise, Diana's vigil in the death-chamber of Lord Dannisburgh is couched in epic terms. The dim room is reminiscent of the underworld: Diana refuses to eat or drink there, as though fearful of being forced to stay, like Persephone, and she listens to

¹³As Dies points out, Dacier's name means "of steel" (*d'acier*) in French, though his disavowal of Diana is anything but "true as steel."

Dacier's talk of the bright summer day outside "as one hearing of a quitted sphere" (192). Her ride home "fasting and unprotected" in a third-class train carriage, during which she breathes "unwholesome" air, sits on a rough bench ("the seats were emphatically seats of penitence") (197), and is placed in danger of sexual harassment or worse, is a gesture of mourning like tearing one's breast or clothing. Here, Diana's adoption of a heroic role takes her beyond acting out a cultural script into the domain of the archetypal. As Beer writes,

Mythology becomes a means of endorsing the *stature* of his heroine while questioning her aspirations. . . . Meredith diffuses the mythological references with surprising delicacy through the sinuous movement of the book. He is claiming to be a historian, not a myth-maker; and myth, with its simplification and mystification of human material, would seem to be at the opposite end of the spectrum from 'realism,' here interpreted as the intense scrutiny of the individual experience. He invokes and fragments mythological material in his representation of 'Reality's infinite sweetness'. He offsets the generality of known 'facts' (the story of Mrs. Norton) by invoking another, idealizing, generality—that of myth, with its suggestive imaging of the psyche's wishes. (156)

Indeed, Meredith saw no inevitable conflict between the "ideal" and the "real." As he wrote in a letter to Augustus Jessop in 1864,

Between realism and idealism there is no natural conflict. This completes that. Realism is the basis of good composition: it implies study, observation, artistic power, and (in those who can do no more) humility. . . . Idealism is an atmosphere whose effects of grandeur are wrought out through a series of illusions, that are illusions to the sense within us only when divorced from the ground-work of the real. Need there be exclusion, the one of the other? The artist is incomplete who does this. Men to whom I bow my head (Shakespeare, Goethe; and in their way, Moliere, Cervantes) are Realists au fond. But they have the broad arms of Idealism at command. They give us Earth; but it is earth with an atmosphere. (qtd. in Cline 176)

Diana, then, simultaneously exists as both a "real," individual human being with thoughts and impressions wholly her own, *and* as a re-enactor of idealized, archetypal patterns. In

Diana, Meredith comes to terms with the script of the hero, and, rather than ironize it as he does in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, he embeds it deeply in his heroine's psyche.

Redworth's ride to the Crossways, similarly, is given heroic overtones, in his case, chivalric ones. This railway investor is forced to use the, to him, archaic, mode of transport by horseback, and Emma, "after fortifying him with a tumbler of choice Bordeaux, think[s] how Tony would have said she was like a lady arming her knight for battle" (109). Like Don Quixote, he meets with several picaresque misadventures *en route* to the Crossways, including an encounter with "ghosts" (or tramps) in a churchyard and a run-in with a peasant guide more interested in watching the butchering of a pig than in earning his fee. He, too, has a foretaste of the underworld when he reaches the Crossways and finds it eerie and empty, the doorbell "seem[ing] to set wagging a weariful tongue in a corpse. . . . Death never seemed more voiceful than in that wagging of the bell" (114).

Though Meredith uses heroic and chivalric language to describe these "ordeals," notably, the person for whose sake the ordeal is carried out is in each case not a lover, as would be the case in knightly romance, but a friend.¹⁴ And in several cases, notably, this "new" chivalry is set up against the chivalry of old England. Sir Lukin, for example, who perhaps holds a knighthood, is a figure who clings to the old ways. Broken down by the stress of his wife's operation, he becomes conservative and defensive:

When you have pulled down all the Institutions of the Country, what do you expect but ruins? That Radicalism of yours has its day. You have to go through a wrestle like mine to understand it. You say, the day is fine, let's have our game. Old England pays for it! Then you'll find how you love the old land of your birth—the noblest ever called a nation!—with your Corn Law Repeals! . . . Once the masses

¹⁴Redworth *is* in love with Diana, but undertakes the ride less for her sake than for Emma's; he has little faith that Diana will be at the Crossways, but wants to do something to soothe Emma's nerves. Moreover, the mock-heroic tone to his "journey" does much to undercut its otherwise romantic nature.

are uppermost! It's a bad day, Dacier, when we've no more gentlemen in the land (239).

Here, Meredith satirizes Lukin as a reactionary blowhard, following his train of thought from overwrought grief and anxiety (one is tempted to say "hysteria") at the thought of his wife's operation, to prayers and false repentance (he will shortly return to philandering), to declarations that there is an "active DEVIL about the world" (239), to his screed against all things radical, which, he implies, are the work of said "devil." Lukin, thus, is portrayed as someone who clings to an antedated worldview out of fear, and whose politics are based on sentiment rather than thought. Moreover, though Lukin achieves tragicomic stature in this one scene, his concern for Emma rendering him alternately moving and bathetic, for the bulk of the novel he remains a two-dimensional character used for comic effect. Much the same can be said about the only other pure representative of "old England" found in the novel—Andrew Hedger, the rustic Redworth enlists to help him find the Crossways. Hedger unwittingly tells Redworth:

"When ah was a boy, old Hampshire was a proud country, wi' the old coaches and the old squires, and Harvest Homes, and Christmas merryings. – Cutting up the land! There's no pride in livin' theer, nor anywhere, as I sees, now."

"You mean the railways."

"It's the Devil come up and abroad ower all England!" exclaimed the melancholy ancient patriot (112).

Though Meredith clearly holds some affection for both Lukin and Hedger, he also intends for the reader to notice a sharp contrast between these comic, flat characters and the much more fully-developed Redworth, Emma, and Diana. This latter set of characters, representing the "new" England, has been invested with interiority and complexity; these characters have rich inner lives and develop and change over the course of the novel. Meredith does evince some nostalgia for the "old England," but suggests that one

advantage of modernity is a fuller interior life. The new England, he implies, has evolved away from the life of the flesh (represented by Lukin's soldiering and Hedger's fascination with the hog slaughter) towards the life of the mind. That being the case, the new chivalry can have as its object the mind and spirit, rather than the body, of the beloved; one can perform heroic deeds in the service of one's friends; and women too can be knightly.

Meredith does, however, complicate the chivalric imagery in the novel by contrasting genuine chivalry with its false, pasteboard imitation. One key difference, he intimates, is one's view of sexuality. Dacier, for example, a literal descendant of knights, (as the narrator tells us, "He was a true descendant of practical hard-grained fighting Northerners, of gnarled dwarf imaginations, chivalrous though they were, and heroes to have serviceable and valiant gentlemen for issue," (189-90) is willing to "serve" Diana as her friends do—but only up to a point. Eventually, he expects sexual favors from her. Dacier uses the tradition of courtly love to sanction his attempts to manipulate Diana into sleeping with him. He thinks, for example,

Small favours from her were really worth, thrice worth, the utmost from other women. They tasted the sweeter for the winning of them artfully – an honourable thing in love. Nature, rewarding the lover's ingenuity and enterprise, inspires him with old Greek notions of right and wrong: and love is indeed a fluid mercurial realm, continually shifting the principles of rectitude and larceny. As long as he means nobly, what is there to condemn him? (290).

Here, he chooses a cultural script about love—one which views love as a contest, and gestures of affection as prizes to be won—which will permit him to pursue Diana with a clear conscience, even to think his suit of her as "honourable." He uses the chivalric script not as an aid to helping others but to sanction his own egoistic ends. The selfish, animalistic nature of his intentions is revealed during his assault on Diana, in which he

grasps her hand until it hurts, saying “I could crack the knuckles,” (283), and then embraces her roughly, “punish[ing] her coldness by taking what hastily could be gathered” (283). Astonishingly, Dacier still expects Diana to become his mistress or wife following this assault, assuaging his conscience by calling up chivalric imagery in his mind: “Had he fretted her self-respect? He blamed himself, but a devoted service must have its term” (291). Chivalry, originally meant to sublimate and purify the sexual impulse in men, here becomes a mere mask for that impulse.

Part of the reason Diana is so upset by Dacier’s forced embrace of her is that she too holds a chivalric view of love—a different one than Dacier’s, but one that Meredith reveals to be no less wrongheaded. Diana likes to believe that platonic, sexless love is possible between men and women. She frequently refers to both Lord Dannisburgh and Dacier as “friends,” in an attempt to convince herself that she has no sexual feelings for either man. When Diana gets to know Dacier, she is relieved to find that he seems to want only platonic friendship with her. Even after they confess their love for one another, he implicitly agrees, at first, to love her from a distance, never so much as touching her hand. This raises him in Diana’s esteem, and she borrows from the cultural script of courtly love to write him into her life as her knight: “His chivalrous acceptance of the conditions of their renewed intimacy was a radiant knightliness to Diana, elevating her with a living image for worship” (254). She refers to him as her “champion” and imagines their “kingdom of love” (228), and he obligingly plays along, telling her that after Warwick’s death he will “reinstate [her] and show [her] the queen she [is]” (228). But Diana’s illusions are shattered, first when Dacier embraces her, and again when Emma alerts her to the true chivalry in Redworth. In her impassioned defense of

Redworth after Diana turns down his proposal of marriage, Emma says, “He probably did not woo you in a poetic style, or the courtly by prescription. . . . You talk much of chivalry; you conceive a superhuman ideal, to which you fit a very indifferent wooden model, while the man of all the world the most chivalrous! . . .” (353; last ellipses Meredith’s). And Diana admits aloud, “I wanted a hero, and the jeweled garb and the feather did not suit him” (354).¹⁵

Redworth’s patient chastity while waiting for Diana stands in sharp contrast to both Dacier’s caddishness and Diana’s frigidity. Though a strongly sexual man—he is an athlete who enjoys cricket and vigorous walks in the countryside, and he bears the ruddy complexion which always signifies sexuality in Meredith’s works—he can keep his impulses in check in the service of a higher goal.

Nevertheless, Meredith’s choice to “marry Diana off” to Redworth has long been a controversial aspect of the novel. Many critics, among them Patricia Stubbs, Kate Millett, Carolyn Williams, and Robert Baker, have found this decision disappointingly conservative. They argue that Meredith undercuts Diana’s feminism by having her submit to an institution she argued so passionately against. Jack Lindsay writes that Diana’s marriage is a regrettable “abandonment of any struggle against the society that has twisted her; she merely succumbs to a conventional marriage” (268), and Gordon goes so far as to claim that Diana gives up the fight and “identifies with the aggressor” (262) in marrying Redworth: “*Diana of the Crossways* concludes as precisely that point where

¹⁵This line recalls the way the speaker of *Modern Love* describes his sentimental wife’s ideal lover: “Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince / The facts of life, you still had seen me go / With hindward feather and with forward toe, / Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!” (X, 13-16). Diana, unlike the wife in *Modern Love*, has learned to see past the trappings of chivalry to the virtues that are at its core.

so many nineteenth-century novels began: the orphan, exhausted from the chase, is incarcerated within some prison that poses as an example of domesticity” (263).

Other critics, however, defend the ending of the novel on more practical grounds, claiming that marrying a sensitive, like-minded man was the best possible ending a woman like Diana could have hoped for in the 1830’s. Wilt, Beer, McGlamery, Dies, and Roberts note that Meredith carefully sets up Redworth as a fitting mate for Diana: they demonstrate how he endows the character with intellect, self-knowledge, generosity of spirit, and a robust masculinity which draws Diana’s sexual interest (Wilt 70-74; Beer 164-66; McGlamery para. 50-57; Dies 22-23; Roberts 221-24). Still, though, one could argue that Meredith sets up a good marriage as a “reward” for Diana once she attains self-knowledge. Wilt, for example, states that

[Meredith] means to say that he has read through the layers of Diana’s very modern and freedom-loving character with all the insight and clarity of which he is capable finally to discern that she wants a Nuptial Chapter, that it is in fact her chosen ending . . . (74)

without taking into account the problems such a reading raises. Diana suffers through and experiences a great deal, Wilt seems to be saying, only to discover that what she really wants—the final “layer” of her personality which she must uncover—is love and domesticity. Though Wilt views the marriage in a positive light, her interpretation still raises some troubling questions. Why must Diana struggle towards self-knowledge to “earn” a husband, going through years of denial, illusion, and change, while Redworth is presented as “complete” and stable in terms of his personality?¹⁶ Why does Meredith use marriage to represent what is presumably the “final” stage of Diana’s development? Are we to see Diana’s independence and feminism as less mature than her married state?

¹⁶See, for example, Beer’s comment that Redworth is “too integrated to be interesting” (165).

I believe that the novel can be read in a way that affirms Diana's marriage to Redworth without vitiating its feminism. First, Meredith does not fetishize marriage for its own sake. Rather, he contrasts the intimate relationships between friends with what is in some cases the purely legal relationship of husband and wife. In sharp contrast to the "ordeals" Diana undergoes for the sake of her friends stands her refusal to come and care for her estranged husband, even when she learns he is suffering from heart disease¹⁷. In one scene, Lady Wathin, a catty and hypocritical defender of "traditional" morality¹⁸, appeals to Diana to return to her husband:

[Lady Wathin] had come to appeal to the feelings of the wife; at any rate, to discover if she had some and was better than a wild adventuress. . . .
 "Permit me to say that I feel deeply for your husband."
 "I am glad of Mr. Warwick's having friends; and they are many, I hope."
 "They cannot behold him perishing, without an effort on his behalf."
 A chasm of silence intervened. Wifely pity was not sounded in it. . . .
 "Is it not—pardon me—a wife's duty, Mrs. Warwick, at least to listen?"
 "Lady Wathin, I have listened to you."
 "In the case of his extreme generosity so putting it, for the present, Mrs. Warwick, that he asks only to be heard personally by his wife! It may preclude so much."
 Diana felt a hot wind across her skin. . . .
 [Lady Wathin] left, it struck her ruffled sentiments, an icy libertine, whom any husband caring for his dignity and comfort was well rid of . . . She left [Diana] the prey of panic. (220-21)

Lady Wathin iterates the word "wife" and "Mrs." (she calls Diana "Mrs. Warwick" *eleven* times within the space of three pages) in the assumption that the cultural and social baggage attached to these words ("a wife's duty") will weigh upon Diana and cause her to change her mind. She hopes to cause Diana guilt by implying that Diana is

¹⁷Here clear parallels can be made with Meredith's own life: after his wife's lover abandoned her and she returned to England, she became seriously ill with kidney disease and pleaded with Meredith to reconcile with her. He refused, and never came to visit her, though he did allow her to see their son. He did not attend her funeral (Lindsay 82-83; Stevenson 58-60, 95-96; Jones 79-83, 88-91).

¹⁸She inveighs, for example, against the "heartlessness" of "women with brains," though she herself is quite cunning and hardly devoid of intellect.

not living up to the duties her wifely role has made incumbent upon her, as though the “wifely” part of Diana’s psyche (“she had come to appeal to the feelings of *the wife*”) is analogous to her conscience. But, as Diana shows no proper “wifely” sentiments, Lady Wathin goes away labeling her a “wild adventuress” and an “icy libertine.” To her mind, a woman cannot be good if she lacks “wifeliness.”

As Meredith reveals, however, Diana subscribes to a different code of morality. She is, as the reader has seen, more than capable of “duty” and “pity,” but only to those whom she admires and cares for—her friends. Diana is notably silent when Lady Wathin mentions Warwick’s “friends”; one can almost hear her thinking, *If his friends cannot bear to see him suffer, let them care for him, then*. She does not feel that the mere word ‘wife’ binds her to a man she does not love, and who has been emotionally abusive to her. Moreover, after her spiritual rebirth in alpine Lugano, Diana, at least subconsciously, considers herself a virgin. “Wife,” she argues at several points in the novel, is an artificial category placed upon her by “the Law.” She refers to marriage time and again as imprisonment or slavery:

“husband grew to mean to me stifler, lung-contractor, iron mask, inquisitor, everything anti-natural” (149)

“The Law has me fast, but leaves me its legal view of my small property. It is the married woman’s perpetual dread when she ventures a step. Your Law originally presumed her a China-footed animal.” (266)

“Free,” was a word that checked her throbs, as at a question of life or death. . . . The something unnamed [fear of entrapment], running beside her, became a dreadful familiar; the race between them past contemplation for ghastliness. “But this is your Law!” she cried to the world, while blinding her eyes against a peep of the shrouded features. (269)

Meredith also critiques marriage as a generic expectation, both in fiction and in life. In chapter XXXVI, for example, the chapter in which Dacier and Constance Apser are

wedded, differing perspectives on marriage enter into dialogue with one another. First, Meredith informs the reader of how the general public has “read” Dacier’s marriage: “The Hon. Percy Dacier espouses Miss Asper; and she rescues him from the snares of a siren [i.e., Diana], he her from the toils of the Papists” (306). The public thinks of this marriage as though it is a scene from a popular novel, or a sentimental anecdote with a moral attached to it. However, this perspective clashes with what the reader knows of Dacier: he put off becoming officially engaged to Constance for months while he courted Diana, who is hardly the straightforward “siren” of popular myth. Dacier, too, is no pasteboard hero of a romance but a complex character. But, as Roberts notes, once Dacier becomes betrothed to Constance, Meredith’s presentation of him becomes purposely flatter and more one-dimensional (215).¹⁹ After Dacier abandons Diana, the narrator only allows the reader access to Dacier’s mind in order to satirize him and take polemical potshots at him:

But the right worshipful heroine of Romance was the front-face female picture [i.e., Constance] he had won for his walls. Poor Diana was the flecked heroine of Reality: not always the same; not impeccable . . . not one whose purity was carved in marble for the assurance to an Englishman that his possession of the changeless thing defies time and his fellows, is the pillar of his home and universally enviable. (305)

By choosing Constance, the “saintly” angel in the house (Constance considered becoming a Catholic nun before Dacier proposed to her; *her* choices for her life’s path were either marriage or perpetual virginity) over Diana, the “flecked” but less predictable “heroine of Reality,” Dacier bowed to the cultural script of romantic love and marriage. He thus made his story entirely predictable and not worth narrating past his wedding day; all the intelligent narrator can do with him is mock him for his conventionality.

¹⁹Roberts aptly notes that Dacier “sinks into the hell of a full-scale objectified parody” in his proposal scene with Constance (212).

In this selfsame chapter, Dacier's conventional marriage is juxtaposed with a "ceremony" of a different sort: the highly *unconventional* metaphorical 'marriage' between Diana and Emma. This scene bears quoting at some length:

[Diana's] feet were on the rug her maid had placed to cover them. Emma leaned across the bed to put them to her breast, beneath the fur mantle, and held them there despite the half-animate tug of the limbs and the shaft of iciness they sent to her very heart. When she had restored them to some warmth, she threw aside her bonnet and lying beside Tony, took her in her arms, heaving now and then a deep sigh.

She kissed her cheek. . . .

Emmy laid her face on the lips. They were cold; even the breath between them cold.

"Has Emmy been long . . . ?"

"Here, dear? I think so. I am with my darling."

Tony moaned. The warmth and the love were bringing back her anguish.

She said: "I have been happy. It is not hard to go."

Emma strained to her. "Tony will wait for her soul's own soul to go, the two together."

There was a faint convulsion in the body. "If I cry, I shall go in pain."

"You are in Emmy's arms, my beloved."

Tony's eyes closed for forgetfulness under that sensation. A tear ran down from her, but the pain was lax and neighboured sleep, like the pleasure. (312)

Notably, Meredith renders this scene as a metaphorical marriage, complete with quasi-sexual consummation, between the two women. Emma, "heaving now and then a deep sigh," embraces her friend and kisses her on the lips; Diana "moan[s]" with renewed love and warmth, experiencing "a faint convulsion in the body" as Emma "strain[s] to her." Like a newly-deflowered bride, Diana feels "anguish" and "pain" that soon subsides, to be replaced by a pleasurable "afterglow": "the pain was lax and neighboured sleep, like the pleasure" (312). Meredith also makes use of the trope of orgasm as "the little death": the women speak of their souls "going" from their bodies in a way that suggests both actual death and sexual climax. Furthermore, this "wedding" contains vows ("It is Emmy come to stay with you, never to leave you"; "But 'pledge me' is a noble saying, when you

think of humanity's original hunger for the whole. . . .So pledge me, Tony.'') and what may be a parody of holy communion (the two women eat soup from the same spoon, which Emma calls "a closer bond than the loving cup") (313). After her 'marriage,' Diana becomes a new person, reviving to life and health from a state close to death. This, Meredith implies, is closer to a true marriage—a merging of souls—than Dacier and Constance's "storybook" wedding. Diana and Emma will henceforth be bound to one another by love alone, and not by laws which will constrict them and limit their freedom.²⁰

When Diana marries Redworth at the close of the novel, her marriage comes as an addition to, and not an obviation of, the bond she shares with Emma. The relationship between these three friends is a triangulated one, with Redworth serving in some ways as a link between the two women. When Emma intuits that Diana has run to The Crossways before leaving the country, for example, it is Redworth who rides to find Diana, give her Emma's letter, and bring her back to Emma's home at Copsley. Emma advocates Redworth as a husband for Diana from the start, and, after Diana refuses his first proposal, Emma is the one who pleads his case, thereby getting Diana to accept him. Due to his gender, Redworth is able to give Diana things that Emma cannot: physical protection and service (like his ride to The Crossways), financial stability, sexual fulfillment ("Oh, by George, I say, what a hugging that woman'll get!", one of Sir

²⁰This scene of course raises the question of Diana and Emma's sexuality. Sally Ledger argues that there is an aspect of repressed homosexuality in Diana and Emma's friendship, claiming that "the absence of a discourse on same-sex love between women is powerfully felt" in the novel (133). She places her discussion of *Diana* in a chapter entitled "Emergent Lesbian Identity." Meredith, a friend of such bohemian types as Rossetti and Swinburne, surely would have been aware of lesbianism, but the term as we use it today does not quite capture the subtleties of Diana and Emma's relationship. Diana, for instance, clearly loves Emma and enjoys a relationship with her which is not platonic (if not overtly sexual either), yet she also is strongly sexually responsive to several of the male characters in the novel. (Ledger claims that Diana's "metamorphosis as Redworth's lover is entirely unconvincing," yet cites only one of Meredith's most regrettable passages of purple prose as evidence) (137).

Lukin's friends comments upon hearing of the engagement [346],) and the ability to procreate (it is implied that Diana is pregnant in the last line of the novel). In some ways, then, Meredith *reverses* the power relations between genders by using a man to cement the homosocial bond between two women.

The final scene of the novel should also be taken into consideration. The novel does not close on Diana's wedding day but several months later, when she returns from her honeymoon to visit Emma. Emma, musing on her two friends, idealizes them in a characteristically Meredithian manner, desiring "to clasp in her lap . . . a child of the marriage of the two noblest of human souls, one the dearest; and so, have proof at heart that her country and our earth are fruitful in the good, for a glowing future" (365). Emma (and possibly Meredith as well) regards the child—notably, its gender is not identified—as the first person of the next, more fully-evolved, iteration of society. She too, however, has a role in the parentage of the child: she hopes to become its "godmother" (415), thus becoming the "spiritual" side of Meredith's classic triad (with Diana, presumably, serving as "blood" or body, and Redworth as "brains").

Meredith, then, does qualify the comic ending of his novel in many ways. He takes pains to foreground friendship, particularly friendship among women, and to suggest that friendship can be as valuable a relationship as marriage. He also critiques the institution of marriage, and makes a tacit argument against laws that made divorce difficult to obtain.

However, Meredith did believe that marriage could be fulfilling and help one to grow in self-knowledge. His second marriage, to Marie Vuillamy, was a happy one that lasted twenty-one years, and ended with Marie's death in 1885. Marie became mortally ill with

cancer while Meredith was writing *Diana of the Crossways*, an event that likely caused Meredith to reflect on his marriage and how fruitful it had been for both parties.

In *Diana*, Meredith tries to write marriage as well as friendship into his own personal philosophy of personal growth and harmony with nature. He does not condemn marriage but only the legal framework surrounding the institution which forced unhappy partners to remain bound to one another. Instead, he hints towards an organic, almost “common-law” type of marriage as a healthier alternative. But Meredith also writes *Diana* in such a fashion that the character seems to persist beyond her marriage. He invites the reader to imagine that *Diana* continues to grow and change long after the events of the novel have finished. *Diana*’s marriage to Redworth, he suggests, is to be read as simply another phase of her development, and not as the event which completes her.

Letters Meredith wrote during the writing of *Diana* shed some light on the dual nature of the conclusion. “*Diana of the Crossways* keeps me still on her sad last way to wedlock,” he told Julia Stephen on May 19, 1884. “I could have killed her merrily, with my compliments to the public; and that was my intention. But the marrying of her, sets me traversing feminine labyrinths, and you know that the why of it can never be accounted for” (qtd. in Cline 737). In August 1884 he wrote to her again, saying that

the coupling of such a woman and her man is a delicate business. She has no puppet-pliancy. The truth being, that she is a mother of Experience, and gives that dreadful baby suck to brains. I have therefore a feeble hold of her; none of the novelist’s winding-up arts avail; it is she who leads me. (qtd. in Cline 743)

Meredith clearly wanted *Diana of the Crossways* to have a satisfying and appropriate ending, these letters suggest, but he also found the character of *Diana* “leading” him as he wrote. His willingness to let the character develop in a naturalistic fashion, without

censoring her to serve his purpose, gives the final chapters of *Diana* their intriguing mixed quality.

Diana and Redworth's marriage represents, as many critics have noticed, a synthesis of opposites. Sun imagery surrounds Redworth, making him an ideal counterpart to Diana's moon. Redworth is British, and often epitomizes what Meredith thought of as "Saxon" qualities: he is rational, practical, hearty, physically-fit, and eschews overt displays of emotion. Irish Diana, on the other hand, represents the "Celtic" temperament with her fiery, emotional nature and talent for writing.²¹ Clearly, this marriage is meant to be taken as a synecdoche of some greater union.

Much as he did with the bedroom scene between Emma and Diana, Meredith wrote for Diana and Redworth an unofficial "marriage" scene that is far more meaningful than the moment when they are legally wed. Redworth considers himself "married" in spirit to Diana before she accepts his proposal: "He had already wedded her morally," the narrator notes during the days of Diana's convalescence, "and much that he did, as well as whatever he debated, came of Diana; more than if they had been coupled" (343). During the woodland walk on which they become engaged, Diana and Redworth are symbolically "married" by nature. Diana wears a veil, and the wind unites the couple by forcing them to link their arms against it: "They descended upon great surges of wind . . . and they blinked and shook; even the man was shaken. But their arms were interlinked and they grappled; the battering enemy made them one. It might mean nothing, or everything: to him it meant the sheer blissful instant" (358). Diana then lifts her veil, on Redworth's request, and infers he is asking her to marry him from his scattered words:

²¹Emma, at one point, senses a "foreshadowing of the larger Union, in the Irishwoman's bestowal of her hand on the open-minded Englishman she had learned to trust" (362).

“‘Have you? . . . ’ changed to me, was the signification understood. ‘Can you?—for life! Do you think you can?,’ (358). Much as Redworth learned to “read” her, Diana now reads him, with an intuitive, subverbal knowledge.

And yet, despite the seeming finality of Diana’s choosing a man as stable, constant, and symbolically appropriate as Redworth, there are indications that readers are not to take the ending as the “end” of Diana. At the novel’s close, for example, Diana is still coming to terms with her emergent sexuality. Even shortly after accepting Redworth’s proposal, she still tries to think of him as a “friend”:

she had a slight shock of cowering under eyes tolerably hawkish in their male glitter; but her coolness was not disturbed, and without any apprehensions she reflected on what has been written of the silly division and war of the sexes: -- which two might surely enter on an engagement to live together amiably, unvexed by that barbarous old fowl and falcon interlude. Cool herself, she imagined the same of him, having good grounds for her delusion (358).

But then, Redworth embraces her, and:

a big storm-wave caught her from shore and whirled her to mid-sea, out of every sensibility but the swimming one of her loss of self in the man. . . . She was up at his heart, fast-locked, undergoing a change greater than the sea works; her thoughts one blush, her brain a fire-fount. This was not like being seated on a throne.

“There,” said he, loosening his hug, “now you belong to me! I know you from head to foot. After that, my darling, I could leave you for years, and call you wife, and be sure of you. I could swear it for you—my life on it! That’s what I think of you. Don’t wonder that I took my chance—the first:--I have waited!” (359).

Continuing the sexual metonymy of the rest of the novel, if Lukin’s embrace is an affront, and Dacier’s a rape, this one is the metaphorical “consummation” of Redworth and Diana’s marriage. The language of fire and sea suggests sexual climax, and Redworth certainly seems convinced that his embrace is equal to a vow. But, though Diana is pleasantly aroused by the embrace, it changes her view of Redworth: she sees him as “the man [was] violently metamorphozed [sic] to a stranger, acting on rights she

had given him” (359). Returning home, she enters an unaccustomed state of almost pure physicality: “her submission and her personal pride were not so much at variance: perhaps because her buzzing head had no ideas” (360).

But anyone who has spent the preceding 400-plus pages of the novel with Diana knows her head will not remain empty of ideas for long; she is too intelligent and perceptive for this love-stricken state to be permanent. Indeed, when she parts from Redworth on the evening of their first embrace, she tells him, “I bring no real disgrace to you, my friend.” He rebukes her with his answer, “You are my wife!” (360). Though she grows significantly in self-knowledge over the course of her brief engagement, it will take time for her to see Redworth as a husband and not a “friend.” Her capacity for self-delusion is still very much intact: after Redworth leaves her, she considers that she is “not deeply enamoured” and thinks of her upcoming marriage dispassionately, even philosophically, as “the archway to the road of good service, even as our passage through the flesh may lead to the better state” (361).

Diana, then, has room for growth and change in the future. Her marriage, positive as it may be, is merely the next stage in her development. Deeply in love, she enjoys temporarily being “dominated, physically and morally, submissively too” (361) and elevates Redworth to much the same pedestal she placed Dacier upon. (“Last night, when he took my hand kindly before going to bed, I had a fit for dropping on my knees to him,” she tells Emma. “Sol in his moral grandeur! How infinitely above the physical monarch—is he not, Emmy?”) (350). But Diana is too strong-willed to remain in this state long, nor does Meredith believe any marriage will lack the “barbarous fowl and

falcon interlude” for very long. Diana, with Redworth at her side, has many more changes to undergo.

III.

Despite his acceptance of role-play and his allowance for great change in an individual’s personality throughout the years, Meredith did believe that each person has a stable core that remained unchanged throughout his or her life. His term for this core was the *soul*. Meredith’s beliefs about the soul are best articulated late in *Diana of the Crossways*, in a passage where the narrator describes the nature of Redworth’s love for Diana:

The difference between appetite and love is shown when a man, after years of service, can hear and see, and admit the possible, and still desire in worship; knowing that we of earth are begrimed and must be cleansed for presentation daily on our passage through the miry ways, but that our souls, if flame of a soul shall have come of the agony of flesh, are beyond the baser mischances: partaking of them indeed, but sublimely. Now Redworth believed in the soul of Diana. For him it burned, and it was a celestial radiance about her, unquenched by her shifting fortunes, her wilfulnesses, and, it might be, errors. She was a woman and weak; that is, not trained for strength. She was a soul; therefore perpetually pointing to growth in purification. He felt it, and even discerned it of her, if he could not have phrased it. The something sovereignly characteristic that aspired in Diana enchained him. With her, or rather with his thought of her soul, he understood the right union of women and men, from the roots to the flowering heights of that rare graft. . . . With her, wound in his idea of her, he perceived it to signify a new start in our existence, a finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in our good gross earth; the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction. In sooth, a happy prospect for the sons and daughters of Earth, divinely indicating more than happiness: the speeding of us, compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races, now very dimly imagined. (318)

Meredith’s concept of the soul is intimately tied to his belief in the perfectibility of humankind. The body, or “blood,” may be corruptible and animalistic, but the “soul,” he believed, aspired to higher things. Though Meredith rejected orthodox Christianity, his

concept of the relationship between body and spirit owes much to original sin. Our bodily nature, or “blood,” he thought, was good but prone to error. Ignoring the impulses of the blood, as Diana attempts to do, leads to self-delusion, prudishness, an unhealthy disconnect from nature, and an exaggerated sense of self-importance. At the same time, the blood is the animal part of us, “good gross earth” which we ought to overcome but not abandon altogether. Indeed, hardships endured by the body and the psyche “purify” the soul, as Emma expresses in her final aphorism: “There is nothing the body suffers that the soul does not profit by” (364). The “baser mischances” the body and psyche undergo are not to be taken as final estimations of one’s character, but as testing grounds for the soul.

As individuals evolve towards a higher state, Meredith believed, so does the human race. *Diana of the Crossways* can be read as evolution in miniature. Diana fights her way through numerous challenges to become a better person, and the offspring she and Redworth will bear, presumably, will be better off for their parents’ trials. In this way, Meredith finds cause for optimism, and not anxiety, in Darwin’s theories. He looks not to humanity’s past—the lowly apes who were its forefathers—but to its future—the higher sort of beings it will give rise to. In this way, evolution almost becomes a secular religion for Meredith. It gives him a moral code, a “heaven” of sorts to aspire to, solace for the fact of death, and a redemptive vision of the future. Meredith thus finds a non-Christian way of redeeming the errors or “sins” of mankind and of consoling people for the mischances that befall them.

Meredith also finds consolation for the fragmentation of the self in friendship and the metaphor of reading. He does suggest, throughout his oeuvre, that it is never possible for

one human being to “know” another entirely, but intimates that a person who “reads” another carefully and diligently, from a position of love and admiration—the position of a friend—can gain important insight into her character, and know something of her “soul.” This idea comes across most clearly in the episode in which Emma “divines” the knowledge that Diana will go to the Crossways before leaving England through reading her friend’s letter (quoted on pages 13-14). Reflecting Diana’s agitated state of mind, the prose of the letter is awkward and confused, revealing multiple trains of thought at odds with one another. Littered with dashes, exclamation points, and outcries (“your Tony!”; “My beloved!”; “my only truly loved on earth!”), it reads like a fragment of Diana’s consciousness. The writer herself attests in it to her feelings of fragmentation and bewilderment: “I am not mistress of myself, and do as something within me, wiser than I, dictates” (105); “I am utterly solitary, sustained neither from above nor below, except within myself, and that is all fire and smoke, like their new engines” (105).

Nevertheless, Emma is able, through prior knowledge of her friend and careful close reading of the letter, to enter into Diana’s state of mind and correctly predict her movements. The process by which Emma does this merits close attention:

She read the letter backwards, and by snatches here and there; many perusals and hours passed before the scattered creature exhibited in its pages came to her out of the flying threads of the web as her living Tony, whom she loved and prized, and was ready to defend against the world. By that time the fog had lifted . . . Her invalid’s chill sensitiveness conceived a sympathy in the baring heavens, and lying on her sofa in the drawing-room she gained strength of meditative vision, weak though she was to help, through ceasing to brood on her [psychic] wound and herself. She cast herself into dear Tony’s feelings; and thus it came, that she imagined Tony would visit The Crossways, where she kept souvenirs of her father . . . before leaving England for ever. The fancy sprang to certainty; every speculation confirmed it. (105-06)

Emma reads with diligence and labor, and her reward is that Diana springs to life (“living Tony”) from a mere representation (“the scattered creature *exhibited* in its pages”). Her reading spurs chivalric impulses: her conviction of Diana’s innocence is renewed, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and she begins thinking of herself as Diana’s defender. Notably, through putting aside self-interest and egoism, and forgetting the slight Diana has dealt her by not coming to see her before leaving, she is able to enter into deep, almost perfect sympathy with Diana.²² This sympathy has a Wordsworthian cast: lying pensively on her couch, finding communion with nature, Emma gains the “inward eye” that allows her to see into Diana’s soul.²³

There is ample evidence to suggest that Emma may stand in for Meredith’s ideal reader. She does, after all, read correctly: Diana *does* go to the Crossways before leaving England. And her reading bears fruit: Redworth, doing Emma’s bidding, is able to reach Diana in time to convince her to stand trial, thus saving her from certain social death (she would naturally have been assumed guilty had she fled the country). Moreover, the passage in which Emma reads the letter is bracketed by two pointed examples of *misreading*: Sir Lukin’s assumption of Diana’s guilt after reading a tabloid article about the scandal, and Redworth’s reasoned conviction that Diana is probably not at the Crossways.

Lukin learns of the scandal even before Emma does, by reading a scandal sheet given to him by a former military comrade. Perhaps knowing of Lukin’s acquaintanceship with

²²Contrast this with Dacier’s refusal to “read” Diana after she betrays him: he burns the letter that presumably would have told him her motives for selling his secret, and cannot overcome his own indignation long enough to even consider what Diana might be feeling.

²³Wordsworth was a strong influence on both Meredith’s poetry and his thought. Throughout his novels, his heroes and heroines consistently are able to commune with nature, from which they draw strength and refreshment.

Diana, this comrade has circled the paragraph which concerns Diana and Lord Dannisburgh. Meredith's narrator leaves no doubt as to the quality and reputation of the periodical:

It was one of those journals, now barely credible, dedicated to the putrid of the upper circle, wherein initials raised sewer-lamps, and Asmodeus lifted a roof, leering hideously. Thousands detested it, and fattened their crops on it. . . . The ghastly thing was dreaded as a scourge, hailed as a refreshment, nourished as a parasite. It professed undaunted honesty, and operated in the fashion of the worms bred of decay. Success was its boasted justification. The animal world, when not rigorously watched, will always crown with success the machine supplying its appetites. . . . Why should we seem better than we are? – down with hypocrisy, cried the censor morum . . . The plea of corruption of blood in the world, to excuse the public chafing of a grievous itch, is not less old than sin; and it offers a merry day of frisky truant running to the animal made unashamed by another and another stripped, branded, and stretched flat. (102)

The paper is castigated as a mere product of capitalism (“success was its boasted justification”; “the machine supplying [mankind's lower] appetites”), something almost literally to be consumed (“thousands . . . fattened their crops on it”), rather than a work of art or knowledge aimed at the betterment of mankind. Unlike Diana's letter, which requires careful reading to be comprehended, the scandal sheet can be mindlessly taken in as “refreshment.” It likewise lowers one's view of one's fellow creatures, giving one an excuse to bow to one's lowest impulses, unlike the letter, which inspires Emma to defend Diana and to uphold her innocence.

Significantly, the tabloid paper is aligned with Meredith's view of realism,²⁴ neatly expressed in the novel by Diana and the narrator:

"I wonder whether the world is as bad as a certain class of writers tell us!" she sighed in weariness, and mused on their soundings and probings of poor humanity, which the world accepts for the very bottom-truth if their dredge brings up sheer refuse of the abominable. The world imagines those to be at our nature's depths who are impudent enough to expose its muddy shallows. . . . It is true of its kind, though the dredging of nature is the miry form of art. When it flourishes we may be assured we have been overenamelling the higher forms. (225)

Meredith sees the realists as emphasizing only the "dirty drab" of humanity at the expense of its higher impulses; such writing, he believes, is pernicious in that it does not give readers anything to aspire to, but instead allows them to believe the "mire" the only truth. Though it avoids the maudlin sentimentality (the "overenamelling") of some fiction, it does nothing to persuade readers to overcome their baser instincts. The honest chivalry of Emma, Diana, and Redworth, on the other hand, avoids both extremes of the "rose-pink" of sentimentality and the "dirty drab" of realism, allowing them to hold ideals and achieve good deeds while preventing them from romanticizing one another.

The philandering Sir Lukin represents one of the readers who are taken in by the vulgar realism of the tabloid paper. Despite his thorough reading and re-reading of the paper, Lukin misjudges Diana, suspecting her guilty: "He read it enraged, feeling for his wife; and again indignant, feeling for Diana. His third reading found him out: he felt for both, but as a member of the whispering world, much behind the scenes, he had a longing for the promised insinuations, just to know what they could say, or dared say" (103). By

²⁴In the preface to *Diana*, Meredith famously looks forward to a future day when "the novelist's Art . . . [will] have attained its majority. We can then be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive. Rose-pink [a color Meredith persistent relates to sentimentality] and dirty drab [realism in the Zola vein] will alike have passed away. Philosophy is the foe of both . . . Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight. . . . Honourable will fiction then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood" (60).

the time he breaks the news to Emma, he is convinced that the reason Diana hasn't come to them for aid is that "she could not fib so easily to her bosom friend" (103). As the narrator tells us, "notwithstanding his personal experience of Diana's generosity... he had other personal experiences of her sex, and her sex plucked at the bright star and drowned it" (103).²⁵ Lukin's reading, combined with his experience with women of the demimonde (an underworld perhaps similar to that found in Zola's *Nana*), causes him to convict Diana in his mind. The individual, Diana, becomes subsumed in the category Woman, which to Lukin represents shiftiness and malice. Lukin has read from the book of realism for so long that even lived experience of "generosity" cannot trump his belief in the untrustworthiness of women.

Even Redworth, following his ride to the Crossways, briefly lumps Emma and Diana together with others of their sex. When he arrives at the Crossways and no one answers, the narrator tells us,

This temptation to glance at the wild divinings of dreamy-witted women from the point of view of the practical man, was aided by the intense frigidity of the atmosphere in leading him to criticize a sex not much used to the exercise of brains. . . . They sank to the level of their temperature in his esteem—as regarded their intellects. He approved their warmth of heart. (114)

Redworth accuses women of being sentimental and "dreamy-witted," although his motivation for riding out to the Crossways came from the heart and not the head: he does it to make Emma feel better, because he loves Diana, and also because he is momentarily inspired by Emma's praise of Diana. We are told:

[Redworth's] consciousness of an exalted compassion for [Diana] was heated by [her] flights of advocacy to feel that he was almost seated beside the sovereign poet thus eulogized [Emma has just likened Diana to a Shakespearean heroine], and he was of a modest nature. (107)

²⁵Here Lukin echoes the speaker of *Modern Love*: "A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown / The pit of infamy" (II, 12-13).

Listening to Emma's "text," which partakes of poetry rather than tabloid journalism, Redworth is moved to the high virtue of "compassion" and to take heroic action. Nevertheless, while riding, he finds himself having to shelve his reasoning facilities in order to convince himself that the enterprise is not folly: "His *errand* would not bear examination, it seemed such a desperate long shot. He shut his inner vision on it, and *pricked* forward" (110; emphasis mine). Chivalry, Meredith implies, may be opposed to reason (Redworth curses the muddy, uneven countryside as he rides, and muses on how a railroad would get him to the Crossways much faster); it may be an office of the heart rather than the head, but, in some cases at least, it is the right course of action. Diana *is* at the Crossways, as Emma divined, and she *is* "saved" by Redworth's ride. Interestingly, Meredith aligns chivalry with the feminine domain of the heart rather than the masculine one of the head: a "dreamy-witted woman" was the one who precipitated Diana's rescue. Reading, too, one might surmise, necessarily requires some suspension of the rational faculties. To read with the heart allows one to believe in virtue, innocence, and in the improbable, and thus opens up the space for heroic action.

Gradually, Redworth, as his name suggests ("read-worth"), learns to "read" Diana. Like Emma, he comes to look through "daily shifting feminine maze" (341) of Diana's mental turmoil to the soul within. Redworth, the loyal, patient lover who can see past the ephemeral to the permanent, thus seems a fitting mate for Diana in her final iteration.

What Emma and Redworth do, importantly, is what Meredith's narrator implies his best readers will have done in turning the pages of *Diana of the Crossways*:

Those yet wakeful eccentrics interested in such a person as Diana, to the extent of remaining attentive till the curtain falls, demand of me to gather up the threads concerning her . . . Nor is she to show herself to advantage. Only those who read

her woman's blood and character with the head, will care for Diana of the Crossways now that the knot of her history has been unraveled. Some little love they must have for her likewise: and how it can be quickened on behalf of a woman who never sentimentalizes publicly, and has no dolly-dolly compliance, and muses on actual life, and fatigues with the exercise of brains, and is in sooth an alien: a princess of her kind and time, but a foreign one, speaking a language distinct from the mercantile, trafficking in ideas:--this is the problem. (331-32)

Here the "flying threads of the web" Emma must read through become the "unraveled knot" of Diana's story and the loose "threads" Meredith "gathers up" for those readers who still care to interpret them. The ideal reader will interpret Diana as Emma did, with care, empathy, and "some little love"—in short, becoming her friend.

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